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MARCH 2008

The old man's
Horse Friends
were champing
at the bit...
BY SCOTT MACKAY

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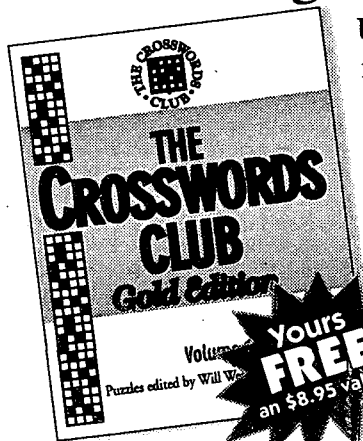
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GUEST EDITORIAL

LESLIE S. KLINGER

THE IMMORTAL SHERLOCK HOLMES

It's proverbial that no one today reads the stories of Sherlock Holmes for the mystery element. After all, in one of them, the butler actually did it! Holmes's deductions are brilliant and his criminological techniques innovative, but the likes of Hercule Poirot and hundreds of others solve much more complex problems with much sparser clues, and modern investigations squeeze far more information from a crime scene than Holmes could even imagine. Why, then, do Holmes fans still number in the tens of thousands?

In 1946, over sixty years ago, Edgar W. Smith, a vice president of General Motors and the editor of the *Baker Street Journal*, a fledgling publication by and for "Sherlockians" now in its sixty-first year, wrote an editorial that he titled "What is it that we love in Sherlock Holmes?" Smith considered several aspects of the Holmes canon.

First, Smith suggested, "We love the time in which [Holmes] lived." When Smith wrote these words, that golden era, when it was "always 1895," was only a half century earlier, and well within the living memory of Smith (who was born in 1894) and the readers of the *Journal* who longed for the time of their youths. Today, it is an alien country, as mythical and foreign as the era of the Greek democracies, the Roman empire, the battlefields of Napoleon, or the court of Elizabeth I. While it may be true that we *do* love the era, we love it as we love the Old West or the countryside of Arthur's Camelot, only as it exists in our imaginations, not in our memories.

To some, the Victorian era appears to have been a simpler time, with laudable national goals and higher social values. To the historian, however, it is the birthplace of every evil of the twentieth century, from terrorism to technology, brutal warfare, terrible genocides, the oppression of women and people of color, and the exploitation of the workers. Yet the late nineteenth century is also the fountainhead of countless

movements to correct those very evils. The Sherlock Holmes stories are remarkable documents of those times, capturing with near-photographic accuracy virtually every aspect of the Victorian world.

More importantly, in 1946, just as the world emerged from the cataclysms of war and the horrors of the Holocaust, Smith saw the detective as an emblem: "[Holmes] stands before us as a symbol," he wrote, "a symbol . . . of all that we are not but ever would be. . . . We see him as the fine expression of our urge to trample evil and to set aright the wrongs with which the world is plagued. . . . [He] is the personification of something in us that we have lost or never had. For it is not Sherlock Holmes who sits in Baker Street, comfortable, competent, and self-assured; it is we ourselves who are there, full of a tremendous capacity for wisdom, complacent in the presence of our humble Watson, conscious of a warm well-being and a timeless, imperishable content. . . . And the time and place and all the great events are near and dear to us not because our memories call them forth in pure nostalgia, but because they are a part of us today. That is the Sherlock Holmes we love—the Holmes implicit and eternal in ourselves."

In 2000, on the occasion of the millennium dinner of the Baker Street Irregulars (an international group dedicated to keeping green the memory of the master), I toasted Sherlock Holmes and weighed Smith's words. As the new century began, I suggested, it was not Holmes's heroism that we treasured in our age of uncertainty. Instead, I proposed, the element of Holmes's character which burnt like a beacon over the years was his *individuality*. While some criticized Holmes as arrogant, cold, ruthless, high handed, misogynistic, unfeeling, and manipulative, I pointed out that he was *single minded*, driven in his pursuit of a case, without regard for the conventions of society or even the conventions of law. In our complex, restricted, regulated, rule-bound culture, I argued, he is what we dream to be and yet dare not to be: *apart from the crowd*. Edgar Smith's vision of the Great Detective was as hero, in an age that sorely needed heroes. Today, I said, we treasure Holmes as an *individual*, who seeks first and foremost to "do the right thing."

But I think now that I failed to observe a third compo-

nent—beyond the Victorian age, beyond the character of Holmes—that makes these stories immortal: the presence of John H. Watson, M.D. In 1944, Christopher Morley, the founder of the Baker Street Irregulars and a bookman for the ages, edited an anthology of Holmes stories and labeled it “A Textbook of Friendship.” In today’s sophisticated marketplace for mystery, more important than the mysteries or the quirks of the Great Detective is the eternal partnership of Holmes and Watson.

The original “buddy movie” in text, these tales, from the pen of Dr. Watson, reveal that Holmes was not only a great brain but a great heart. Unconsciously, they also show the Good Doctor as intelligent, stout hearted, loyal, and utterly dependable. Watson is exactly what we all wish our friends—and ourselves—to be. This is not the Watson of the foolish Universal films, the *boobus britannicus*. After all, how could a man like Holmes have borne such a companion? Watson called Holmes “the best and the wisest man whom I have ever known,” but Holmes never had the chance to return the favor. If he had, he would have undoubtedly termed Watson “that finest of friends.”

In sum, I believe that the annals of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson contain three compelling elements for the modern reader: accurate depictions of the Victorian age, affectionate portraits of a solitary genius, and the comforting warmth of an enduring friendship. Modern mysteries may copy one or more of these, but to Watson’s loyal readers, the *real* game is still afoot!

HORSE FRIENDS

SCOTT MACKAY

As Lance Tedrow walked to his boss's office through the Superior Life bull pen, he knew Opal was watching him, trying to figure out why he was going to see Patrick when Patrick customarily caught up on his e-mails after lunch. Was this it, then, he wondered? Lance peered at Patrick through the glass. Was Patrick going to end their suspense? His bald head was bowed over his work. Had Minneapolis Corporate finally given Patrick word on the promotion? Was Lance going to win out over Opal?

He entered Patrick's office. His boss looked up. "Shut the door."

"Sure." Lance closed the door.

"Have a seat."

Lance obeyed.

Patrick said, "Melvin Graham dropped by about the Osteen policy while you were out at lunch."

Lance's shoulders tightened. "And?"

"He left some materials." Patrick pushed a manila folder across his desk. "Have a look."

So. It wasn't about the promotion after all.

Lance lifted the folder and opened it. He found photographs—views of charred wreckage.

"Has he come to any conclusions, then?"

"Look at photo three. It's the employee lunchroom at the Osteen Paper Plant. Or what's left of it. See the charring in the corner? Those are accelerant patterns. Photograph four shows a half-melted gas can. Graham found it under the collapsed receiving bay next to the employee lunchroom."

The office felt suddenly warm. "So he's ruling arson?"

"Yes. And if I were you, I'd make Everett understand pretty quickly that the discretion clause in subsection three is meant to favor the company, not the client. I know that's the first thing he's going to try."

Lance looked at both photographs again. "I'll schedule a meeting with him this afternoon."

Patrick nodded. "Everett's fairly housebound these days. Coronary troubles. You'll have to go up."

"Sure."

"Take a taxi chit. He makes people drink."

"Okay."

"Maybe I should let Opal go."

The tone in Patrick's voice worried him. "No, it's all right. I'll handle it."

"I know it's one of your own personal policies, but maybe Opal might break the news more dispassionately." "Don't worry, I'll be dispassionate."

Everett's horse friends were only ever whispered about—now they were playing hardball.

Patrick sat back, the corners of his lips tightening. He motioned at the photographs. "We have to be careful. We can't let our clients think we're processing this claim any differently, just because you nearly married Everett's daughter."

"I haven't seen Vicki in years."

Patrick's brow rose. "You haven't heard, then?"

"Heard what?"

"That she's back in town. She and Brian split up."

Lance tried to hide the effect this news had on him, but hearing that Vicki and Brian had at last self-destructed—he'd always known Brian wasn't the man for her—and that she was now back home proved too much. His palms grew moist. Despite his settled life, his good job, and his marriage to Miss Duluth 1995, he was made uncomfortable with the prospect of Vicki Osteen back in town. Old emotions he thought he had long since buried surfaced, even as he desperately tried to contain them.

"So she's living at the old place?" His voice edged a few tones higher. "With Everett?"

"Yes. If she's there when you go, be professional. And dispassionate."

"Have I ever let you down before?"

But his throat had gone dry, his body rigid, and the air in the room had become nearly too thin to breathe.

"Not yet. But there's always a first time."

Once the cab had dropped him off, Lance studied the Osteen house. Paint peeled from the eaves. A second-floor window, broken, had been repaired with cardboard and duct tape. An American flag hung from a pole, tattered, the fabric so worn he could see through it. A 1975 Cadillac Seville, rusted, undriven, its

left front tire flat, stood in the drive, Mrs. Osteen's car from back when she had been alive. He walked up the drive, his boots crunching through the snow. He climbed the steps to the door, lifted the round brass knocker—one he had lifted many times before—and knocked.

Vicki answered a few moments later. His heart contracted, and he had a brief flashback—waiting with his brother in a tux and purple bowtie in the corridor behind the sanctuary of the Duluth First United Methodist Church, telling his brother she would come, that the reason she was late was because she always fussed with her makeup. Today, she wore no makeup. The big red hair was gone. She was pale. Older. But still pretty. He struggled to get his emotions under control, forced himself to think of his wife, Lindsay, and to concentrate on the task ahead.

"Hi, Vicki. I'm here to talk to your father about his policy."

She was drying a plate with a dish towel, inspecting him, assessing him the way she might apples or oranges in a fruit store. "You've gained a little." She touched her chin. "Particularly around here."

He struggled to stay on track. "I think he's expecting me."

"I hope the news is good."

He didn't answer. Instead, he attempted to normalize things with small talk. "Are you keeping well?"

The green eyes were the same, and they stared at him unapologetically. "You know about me and Brian?"

He nodded. "Is it final?"

He heard movement downstairs, Osteen emerging from his den. "Vick, is someone at the door?"

"It's Lance Tedrow, Dad. He's come about the settlement."

"Let's not let all the cold air in." Osteen's voice sounded rough, phlegmy. "Send him down."

Vicki said in a softer voice, "He's been working himself up since your call."

"It's really great to see you, Vicki." Because he had to say something to make sure she understood he still remembered everything.

She looked away. "You better not keep him waiting."

She moved aside.

He advanced into the hall and took off his rubber boots, unzipping them with a noise that made the cat look up from the couch. Vicki shut the door behind him. He pulled off his coat, opened the closet, was about to hang it up, but she stopped him and said, "Here, I'll take that."

He surrendered his coat. It was all so formal. Not that he had expected anything remarkable, but this seemed sad, and even trag-

ic, that after everything they had gone through together it amounted to nothing more than Vicki taking his coat and hanging it in the closet for him as a generic courtesy.

"Thanks." He walked to the top of the stairs.

Osteen, a short, rotund man with hair slicked back and a face as red as a cooked King Crab, stared at him in a studied pose of indifference. The scotch in his hand was a triple.

"Lance, good of you to come. Vick, maybe you could bring snacks."

Vicki went to get snacks. Lance watched her go. Things hadn't changed: Osteen spoke, Vicki jumped.

Lance gripped the banister and went downstairs. He saw a painting of Risky Business, Osteen's Thoroughbred, now dead these many years, on the wall. At the bottom of the stairs, Osteen took his elbow and ushered him into the den.

The TV was still there, the exact same Sony Trinitron from sixteen years ago. He couldn't count the number of late movies he'd watched on that TV with Vicki. The furniture was the same too: black leather, now scuffed, the upholstery on the recliner in particularly bad shape.

"Let me get you something," said Osteen.

"Thanks," said Lance.

He sat on the edge of the couch, put his briefcase on the table, and took out the manila folder with the photographs. He struggled to collect his thoughts. He wasn't going to let Vicki ruin his promotion, not after everything else she had ruined. He was going to stay professional. And dispassionate.

Once he had his drink, they talked briefly about the weather—all the snow. Then about the Minnesota Vikings. And at last about Vicki and Brian's split. "She finally came to her senses," said Osteen. "I always told her the guy wasn't the sharpest knife in the drawer."

Lance couldn't help fishing for information. "They're getting a divorce?"

"She hasn't told me yet."

"And he's still in Rochester?"

"As far as I know." Osteen motioned at the manila folder. "Is that the settlement?"

Lance looked out the sliding glass door where he saw the dog, Hercules—a Rottweiler—staring back. "About the settlement." He glanced around the room. Framed photographs of Osteen and Risky Business hung on the walls: Saratoga Springs, Churchill Downs, Hoosier Park. "There's going to be a delay." He opened the folder, took out photograph three, and slid it across the table to Osteen.

Osteen lifted it, squinted, then put on his glasses. "What am I looking at?"

"Accelerant patterns." He offered photograph four, the gas can. "And I think this shot speaks for itself."

Osteen's nostrils flared as he looked at photograph four. Hercules pawed the door. The snow came down harder. The dog whimpered a few times.

Osteen glanced up at Lance as if Lance had personally betrayed him. "So you're telling me it was arson?"

"That's the investigator's preliminary ruling."

"Who would want to burn down Osteen Paper?"

"That's what he's trying to find out."

"What about my settlement money?"

"I'm sorry, Everett, but if you look at the contractual language in your policy, you'll see that we can't release it until the police have completed their investigation."

Osteen's blue eyes bulged. "I thought the company had the discretion to release the money when it saw fit. It says so in subsection three."

Lance sighed. "That clause is meant to favor the company, Everett, not the client."

"Yes, but can't you help us?" Osteen's voice grew apprehensive. "For Christ's sake, Lance, you nearly married Vicki."

His shoulders tightened. "Everett, I appreciate that I have some personal history with the Osteen family, but we have to set that aside right now. We're dealing strictly with your policy."

"Yes, but I've got bills. I've got debts."

He heard Vicki come down the half flight of stairs to the den.

Osteen quickly collected the two photos and handed them back to Lance. How could he forget? Vicki was Osteen's angel. Osteen tried to shelter Vicki from the big bad world any way he could.

He reluctantly took the photographs, put them in the manila folder, then his briefcase, sullenly cooperating with Osteen's attempt to hide the truth from his daughter. Vicki entered with a plate of crackers, cheese, and pickles. Lance glanced furtively, wondering about her and Brian. She looked tired, worried. She placed the food on the table. Osteen stared straight ahead.

Vicki peered at Lance. "Is everything all right?"

Lance smiled tightly. "Sure. Fine."

She scanned the backyard, where snow drifted down steadily. "Maybe we should let Hercules in." She walked to the door, pressed the latch, and slid it open. Hercules came in, tail wagging, and went to Lance. The dog sniffed his hands, then looked at Osteen, pausing. The Rottweiler finally glanced at Vicki, maybe

thinking she might explain why everybody was being so quiet.

Vicki became animated with stilted cheerfulness. "You two let me know if you need anything." She picked up a newspaper that had slipped to the floor. "Come on, Hercules. Let's leave them alone."

She left the den. Hercules followed, his claws clicking against the linoleum in the hall.

When Vicki and the dog were upstairs, Osteen took a deep breath, shook his head, and motioned at the briefcase. "Does the investigator have any idea when he's going to finish all this?"

"No."

The old man grew still. "Because if there's any way you can speed things along, Lance . . . any way at all. I have bills."

"I'll do my best, Everett. But I'm afraid I can't treat you any better than any other Superior Life client just because I nearly married Vicki."

"That's not my main concern. Just don't treat me any worse."

Lance was at work the next day when Carol buzzed him and told him Vicki's estranged husband, Brian Baum, was waiting for him in the reception area. At first he was puzzled. Not that he hated Brian—the man hadn't *willfully* taken Vicki away from him. But why did Brian think Lance wanted to talk to him? Or even be in the same room with him?

In his mid forties, Brian wore his hair long and had a small silver stud in his left ear. His hair, dyed black, looked unnatural on a man who had so many middle-aged wrinkles. He was pale, thin, smelled of cigarettes. Brian extended his hand. Lance found he couldn't shake it.

Brian glanced at Carol, then let his hand sink. "You got a coffee break or something?" The secretary was doing her best to ignore them, but Lance knew she was listening to every word—not good because Carol was friends with Opal.

Lance grabbed his coat from the coat tree, slipped on his rubber overshoes, and followed Brian into the corridor. He inspected Brian's footwear, battered old cross trainers, unlaced. He couldn't figure it out. What did Vicki see in the guy? He remembered Brian from high school. Hadn't been good at sports. Hadn't had any friends. Grew marijuana in his parents' backyard. What the hell did Vicki see in him?

Before they reached the elevators, Brian pushed the fire door open.

Lance hesitated. "Where are you going?"

"Down here."

"Why?"

"I have to talk to you. In private."

"Brian, I've got a busy day. You should have made an appointment."

"Be cool, Lance. Just be cool for a change."

Brian headed down the stairs. Lance reluctantly followed.

Their footsteps echoed in the cavernous space. They went down two flights. Brian stopped on the third-floor landing, opened the door, and looked along the corridor. Lance looked as well. The corridor was empty. Brian, remaining inside the stairwell, let the fire door swing shut. He walked to the banister, peered up, then down, and satisfied they were alone, said to Lance in a low voice, "Everett's in a bad fix right now. He borrowed some money. From old horse friends. And he made a few disastrous bets."

Horse friends. Lance had to pause. He vaguely remembered how Everett's horse friends were only ever whispered about in the Osteen household. "He mentioned he had bills."

"Oh, these are more than just bills. His old horse friends are playing hardball."

"Did Everett send you here?"

"No. But I've read the policy. This discretion clause gives you leeway."

Lance sighed and shook his head. "Leeway for the company, Brian, not the client. I've already explained that to Everett. And I'm really not at liberty to discuss any of this with you."

"It would mean a lot to Everett if you released the money now."

"I'm sorry, Brian, but we have certain procedures we have to follow."

Brian's lips tightened. "Vicki said you might be like this."

"She's the one who sent you?"

"Let's just say I'm an interested party."

Lance's tone became unpleasant. "Maybe you should have stayed in Rochester."

"Just release the money and I'll be on my way."

Lance shook his head again. "Brian, you realize you coming here to talk to me like this just makes things worse."

Brian seemed surprised. "Why?"

"Because you're telling me Everett owes money to old horse friends. Now his company burns down, and you're pressuring me for the payout." Lance sighed and shook his head. "You see the way that looks, don't you?" No, definitely not the sharpest knife in the drawer. "Go back to Rochester. I'll pretend we didn't have this conversation. For Everett's sake."

"But you have the final say, don't you? Vicki was telling me

it was one of your own independent policies from before the consolidation."

"That might be true, but I still have to wait until the investigation is over. How much money does Everett owe?"

"You know Everett. He's always done things in a big way." Brian shook his head. "Even if he remortgaged his house, he wouldn't have enough." Brian gave him the figure. "Which is why it's so important you sign off on the policy now, Lance. These guys are serious. They don't penalize with interest rates. They're old school. They're going to hurt Everett."

"Yes, but now it seems as if Everett intentionally burned down Osteen Paper to raise the money. And coincidentally, the settlement would about cover the figure you just gave me. Have they actually threatened him yet?"

Brian glanced up the stairwell, his lips going slack, then in a lower voice, he said. "Two men came from Chicago last night."

"Really?"

"They had golf clubs."

Lance's eyes widened. "Golf clubs?"

"Yes. And who in Duluth plays golf in the middle of winter?"

At the end of the day, just as Lance was getting ready to leave, Melvin Graham, the arson investigator, came to visit him.

Graham was a tall man with a large square head, lambchop sideburns, and a handlebar mustache the color of smoke. He put a file folder on Lance's desk, opened it, and tapped it with his thick square finger. *

"These are the test results from the lab. They came back positive for accelerant, just like we thought."

As much as Lance knew he should tell Graham about his conversation with Brian Baum, he found he couldn't. "Have you developed any solid leads yet, then?"

"We're following up the gas can from photo four."

"The gas can?" That a gas can could be followed up surprised him.

"Make, model, and so forth."

"Really."

"It's a five-gallon Falcon-1 safety can. You can't actually buy them in Duluth, but you can get them in Minneapolis and Rochester. We're fortunate that the lot number wasn't burned off."

Lance felt a nervous pang at the mention of Rochester. "What about the interviews?"

"The interviews with Osteen employees failed to yield anything

useful. Osteen Paper doesn't seem to have any enemies, and an examination of the books reveals the firm is at least modestly solvent. Money doesn't seem to be a factor. Their profit margins are small but viable."

Lance's shoulders tightened. "So you have no definite suspects?"

"We have a few persons of interest, but no real suspects."

"Can I assume the investigation is stalled, then?" He couldn't help thinking of Osteen's horse friends and their golf clubs. "Because if it's stalled, the company might consider releasing the settlement money now."

Graham raised his hands. "Hold off on that for the time being. Let me look into the gas can first. It's bound to turn up something."

Lance was sitting with Lindsay and their two children in their kitchen on Friday night eating Lindsay's macaroni and wiener casserole when over the sound of the dishwasher he heard a car pull up. He thought someone might be using the drive to turn around, but then the engine stopped, a car door opened and closed, and a few seconds later, he heard someone coming up the walk.

The doorbell rang. Lindsay raised her eyebrows. Lance put his fork down, wiped his lips with a paper napkin, rose, and went to answer it.

He found a distressed Vicki Osteen-Baum on the doorstep. His heart did back flips, not only because of their old history together, but because he was anxious about the gas can, insurance fraud, criminal misdoing, everything.

Her cheeks were satiny with tears. "They killed Hercules." Her voice was shaky, high, half whispered. "They came this afternoon and clubbed him to death. While I was at the SuperValu. They put him on top of Mom's old Cadillac. There was blood everywhere. Dad hid upstairs. He was in terrible shape when I got back." Her eyes glistened. "Lance, you have to help us. Dad told me everything. They're going to kill us. You have to release the money."

He couldn't understand how his predictable suburban life, his hard-earned reputation, and his likely promotion could so easily be jeopardized this way. "Vicki, take a deep breath."

Lindsay came into the hall from the kitchen and saw Vicki standing there. Having never met before, the two women knew each other only from photographs. The corners of his wife's lips tightened.

Lance smiled with frantic effort. "Lindsay, this is Vicki Osteen. Vicki, this is Lindsay."

Lindsay raised her chin. "Hi."

Vicki continued to stare. Lindsay—Miss Duluth 1995—was having the same effect she had on everybody. Could anybody be so curvaceous?

"Hi," said Vicki.

"Vicki and I have a few things to discuss regarding her father's policy. Just put the Jell-O on without me."

Lindsay nodded, then retreated, her hourglass figure a rebuff to Vicki's understated contours.

When she was gone, Vicki said, "Wow."

Lance's lower lip stiffened. "You weren't the only fish in the sea, Vicki."

He guided Vicki to his den. He couldn't help noting she was wearing only one driving glove. As she entered, she looked around at the insurance industry certificates, the rubber plant on top of his coffee table, and finally the easy-boy recliner in the corner. He made her sit in the recliner and got her some brandy from the liquor cabinet.

She took the snifter. "Why would they do that, Lance? Why would they kill Hercules? Hercules didn't do anything."

"Is the dog still there? On the car?"

She shook her head. "No. I looked after him. He's in the lake."

"The lake?"

"Where else was I going to put him? The ground's frozen. Superior's always open somewhere."

"And did you call the police?"

She shook her head. "I was too scared to call the police." She took a nervous sip. "I never liked my dad's horse friends. Neither did Mom. I knew they were trouble the minute I first met them. I wish you could do something about them. I wish you would help us. What about this discretion clause Dad was telling me about?"

But he was too upset about the dog to think about the discretion clause. He couldn't believe there were actually people who went around clubbing dogs to death with nine irons. It wasn't possible. Especially in Duluth. It left him in a state of momentary panic, and he didn't get a grip on himself until Vicki prodded him again about the discretion clause.

"It's in subsection three," she said. "Have you read it?"

He nodded. "I already talked to your father about the discretion clause. If you've read the language carefully, you'll see that it's designed to favor the company."

"Yes, but you're our old friend, Lance. My old friend."

"We have procedures we have to follow."

Her face quivered. "So your procedures are more important than we are? After all we've been through together?"

This was unfair, and he tried to ignore it. "Your father's policy is confidential, Vicki. If he wants to talk, have him call me."

"I have a letter of authorization from him. He says I can talk to you about it. He's too ill to leave the house. And too scared."

She pulled the letter from her purse.

He raised his hands. "I don't want to see it."

She paused. "What do I have to do, Lance?"

In a softer voice, he said, "Call the police."

She sighed. "I guess you don't remember Maine, then?"

He lifted his chin, the specter of his heartbreak coming back. "Of course I remember Maine."

"You remember our trailer?"

He looked away. "Yes."

"You remember what went on in that trailer?"

He hesitated. "It happened a long time ago, Vicki."

"You were a different Lance Tedrow back then."

His jaw tensed. "People change."

"I guess you don't remember that small boy either."

His eyes narrowed as he searched his memory. "What small boy?"

"The one outside Eau Claire."

The memory came back to him, the little boy wandering around the campsite, Lance finally taking charge, *Are you lost, let's go find your mom and dad*, then going from trailer to trailer, asking the other campers if they knew him, at last taking him all the way into Eau Claire and inquiring there, finally finding a grateful mother looking for him all over the town's residential streets.

"Yes, but that's not the only thing I remember from that trip," he reminded her. "I think I asked you to marry me on that trip."

She lifted her hand and brushed a stray lock of red hair from her freckled face. Her hand was shaking. "What I'm getting at—and what I'm trying to get you to remember—is how that boy would have been lost forever if you hadn't stepped in. You should step in now."

He shook his head. "I'm sorry about your dad's dog."

She remained still for a few seconds, then put her fingers on his wrist. "Dad's not well."

He hesitated. "Vicki, I would like to help you. But go to the police. That's what you have to do."

She lifted her hand and sat back. "That would make matters worse. They're not nice, these people. They would kill him for that. But you can stop them. Dad says his policy is one of your own independent ones, from before Superior Life consolidated

with the head office in Minneapolis. He says you have sole authority over it, and that you can sign off on it whenever you want."

Lance leaned forward, put his hands on his knees, and stared at the Barbie doll his youngest daughter had left on the floor. "Until the investigation is over, I can't do anything, Vicki."

Vicki lifted her fingers away. "Then you'll have murder on your hands, Lance. Is that what you want?" She paused, and in a more urgent tone said, "I know we have some bad history together. I'm sorry I did what I did. I was young. I regret leaving you there at the church like that. But I've grown up a lot since then. I've come to appreciate the difference between right and wrong. And I know saving my dad is the right thing to do"

"Breaking the law isn't right, Vicki. And I think that's what you're asking me to do here. Also, I could lose my job. And would that be fair to my family?"

"I'm just asking you to sign off on a policy that he's loyally paid his premiums on for the last forty years."

"Yes, but don't you see the way it looks? Your father borrows money, he loses money, he needs money, and Osteen Paper burns down. The whole place burns down just as your dad needs money most. Brian comes over and pressures me for the settlement, and that means he might be involved. Now the fire is under investigation. If that's not suspicious, I don't know what is."

She reached over and put her fingers on his wrist again. "I have no idea what my father did, or what he arranged to have done, or whether Brian is involved, or if Dad got someone else to do it. I really don't care." Her tears came back. "All I know is that you're the only one who can save him. I'm begging you, please." She shook her head. "I'll get down on my knees if I have to. Please save him. For my sake. For the sake of everything you and I used to mean to each other. You don't want murder on your hands, Lance, you really don't. You'll only end up regretting it. And take it from one who knows, regret's not an easy thing after a while."

On Saturday, his neighbors put up Christmas lights. He made a show of doing the same, got the ladder out, untangled the various strings, and climbed to the roof to mount new wire supports for the plywood Santa. But when he realized he was putting up Santa for his kids, yet at the same time considering taking the risk and signing off on the settlement for Vicki—something that would ultimately harm his kids—he lost heart and put the ladder away.

It wasn't because he still loved Vicki, though their old history certainly put some emotional confusion into the mix. And he would never harm his family. It was just that a man's life was at

stake. And he could save it. Wasn't a man's life worth more than the financial hardship his family might face if he signed off on the policy?

The next day, Sunday, a blizzard blew in from Ontario. He got quietly drunk in his den and watched the Vikings game. Vicki's words kept preying on his mind. *You'll have murder on your hands.*

He took a sip of scotch. He looked out the window, where the snow came down in thick squalls, then at the TV, then out the window again, and finally shook his head. He stood up. He glanced at the phone.

Even though it was his own independent policy from preconsolidation days, he would feel a lot better if he got Patrick's okay to sign off on it. A sudden gust howled around the house. The lights momentarily flickered, then came back on. He walked to the phone and dialed Patrick's home number.

Patrick's wife, Vivian, answered. "He's gone to the office, Lance. He had some extra work to catch up on."

Lance called Patrick at the office, but his boss wouldn't pick up. Even after several tries, the line kept defaulting to Carol's voicemail. He pulled the receiver away from his ear and looked at it. He then gently placed it in its cradle.

He went to the kitchen and told Lindsay he had to drive downtown to see Patrick.

"But it's a blizzard outside."

"I know. But something's come up."

"And you've been drinking. You shouldn't drive."

"Don't worry. I'll be fine."

In the reception area at work, only half the lights were on, the ceiling checkered with fluorescent panels, one bright, one dark. He shook the snow from his coat, hung it on the coat tree, and pulled off his rubber overshoes. He went into the main office where, far at the back, he saw Patrick working at his computer.

When his boss saw him coming, the old man's face changed, not much, but enough to tell Lance that maybe Patrick knew more than he thought.

As Lance reached his door, Patrick said, "Another Superior Life warrior, braving Duluth's worst."

"Patrick, I'm going to release the Osteen money."

Patrick grew still. He stared at Lance through his wire-rim glasses. He pulled at the collar of his V-neck, his eyes traveling first to the right of his computer, then flicking to Lance's face. He leaned back in his chair and hoisted a wary smile to his lips. He gestured at the chair opposite.

"Have a seat."

Lance studied his boss, then pulled out the chair and sat. "I think we've made Everett wait long enough. We'll accomplish nothing by making him wait longer."

His boss glanced out the window. The old man's wary smile faded, and creases of perplexity formed at the corners of his eyes. "Lance, the investigation isn't over yet. Why not hold off?"

"Everett's been a loyal customer for forty years, first of yours, now of mine. Why put him through this torture?"

His boss paused, then said, "It's not going to be that much longer. Graham's made a breakthrough. I spoke to him last night. He's traced the gas can to a lot number in Rochester. I find that promising. He's saying the investigation could be over in as little as a week. So Everett's not going to have to wait that much longer."

He stared at his boss. His boss stared back. The silence between them lengthened. "Can I release the money now?" Then, in a more aggrieved tone, added, "At least without jeopardizing my promotion? It's a preconsolidation policy. I don't know why I can't sign off on it."

Patrick took off his glasses, leaned back, and ran his liver-spotted hand through his thinning gray hair. "Why can't you be on the up-and-up with me about what's going on with this whole Osteen thing, Lance? If you think I don't know about Brian Baum coming here last week, I do. Carol told me. And I know Vicki visited you at home on Friday night as well. Lindsay talked to Vivian, and Vivian talked to me. You should thank God Lindsay's looking out for you. Why don't you tell me what's going on?"

Lance glanced out the window where the winter night thickened like an oil spill. Patrick withdrew a bottle of White Label and poured hefty doses into coffee mugs. He handed a mug to Lance. Lance contemplated the contents, then downed the double shot in one go. "Lindsay shouldn't spy on me."

Patrick smiled, but it was an odd smile. "Let me ask you something, Lance. If you were in a burning building, and you had to choose between saving Miss America or the president, who would you save?"

Lance's answer was disgruntled. "Probably the president."

"And if you were in that same burning building, and you had to choose between the woman who left you standing at the altar sixteen years ago, or the man who's fed and clothed your family for the last decade-and-a-half, who would it be? Because I'll tell you one thing, if you sign off on the Osteen policy, corporate's not going to look too kindly upon me, even though it is your own personal policy. It will be me in that burning building."

"It's not as simple as you think, Patrick." Lance stared at his boss and made another try. "Can we just sign off on it? That way, no one gets hurt."

"So someone's going to get hurt?"

He prevaricated. "If we sign off on it, I'll take the blame. Underline for corporate that it was my own independent policy. Tell them I was managing it long before consolidation. Tell them I don't care about the promotion."

"Yes, but Lance, we work as a team. The profits are measured together, regardless of whether it's a post- or preconsolidation policy. Corporate couldn't care less about your solo policies."

Lance looked away, the booze starting to sour his stomach. "I'm going to sign off on it."

Patrick pressured him. "Lance, come on. You really want to think about that."

"They killed his dog."

Dead silence. It was as though there had been an explosion in another part of the office, and all the air had been sucked out of the room. Then Patrick said in a voice that had all the brittleness of fresh harbor ice, "Who killed whose dog?"

Lance felt he was standing on top of a tall building, was scared to jump, yet at the same time felt compelled to jump. "Horse guys from Chicago. They killed Everett's dog. He borrowed money from them and made a few crappy bets. Big ones. And lost. Now he owes them. They're up from Chicago to collect. With golf clubs."

Patrick's eyes narrowed. "Golf clubs?"

Lance shook his head. "The dog went first. The old man's next. That's why we should sign off on the policy."

The snow ticked against the window. "Why doesn't Everett call the police?"

"Because they'll murder him if he does. Do you want murder on your hands, Patrick?" Even as he spoke, he knew it was a despicable tactic, shifting blame, and more despicable, to parrot Vicki's exact words. "For a policy he's loyally paid his premiums on for the last forty years? Let's do the moral thing. Let's sign off on it."

Patrick's features settled, and he shook his head. "There's been a lot going on behind your back while you've been stewing yourself up about all this, Lance. If you want to know the truth, Graham's taking a real close look at Brian Baum. That's the breakthrough I was telling you about. Graham's linked Brian to the gas can. So it's looking bad for Everett, and if you sign off on things now, you're going to make a lot of trouble for yourself and your family. And do you really want that?"

That's when Lance began to see there was nothing he could do, that karma, as payback for the way Vicki had left him stranded at the church, was going to have its revenge against her, first by killing her father, then incarcerating her husband, whether he wanted it to or not. Oddly, he felt a sick thrill from the notion, and an unexpected catharsis that left him weak with a bitter joyfulness.

"How did Graham specifically link Brian to the gas can?"

"By the lot number in Rochester, and with a gas station security tape showing Brian filling a can similar to the one in photo four." Patrick sighed. "Lance, if Everett and Brian are playing us for the settlement—and Graham's convinced they are—there's no point in trying to protect them now. If you sign off on the policy now, your credibility as an insurance agent would nose-dive. You'd never work in the industry again. You'd put your family through hell. And do you really want that? Do you really want Vicki to wreck your life a second time after she wrecked it a first time sixteen years ago? Because I know that's who you'd be signing off on it for."

He looked out the window where he saw snow coming down harder. "No, I guess not." And knew he would have to get used to having murder on his hands.

The news of Everett Osteen's brutal slaying came a few days later. Lance and his family were at Wendy's having burgers and fries. Melvin Graham called him on his cell phone and gave him the details.

"They drove him to Arrowhead Road, beat him to death, and left him in the trunk of his car. A state trooper found him. Oh, and by the way, I have Brian Baum in custody for the arson."

Karma. Revenge was his. Whether he wanted it or not. He couldn't help picturing Osteen, dead in the trunk of his car, a shrunk old senior, the man who would have been his father-in-law if things had turned out differently, beaten to death with a nine iron. And he couldn't help thinking of Brian in an orange corrections jumpsuit. And of how Vicki was now all alone.

On Monday, as if irony were a necessary component to karma, Patrick gave him the promotion.

Over the coming week, he looked for a funeral notice, but the paper didn't print one. He learned from Melvin Graham that the homicide detectives were holding the body indefinitely, pending a conclusion to their investigation. "A bit like the arson thing. We had to keep it open a while. These things take time."

As there was no funeral scheduled in the foreseeable future,

Lance drove to the Osteen place two days before Christmas to offer his condolences to Vicki, only to discover that there was a FOR SALE sign in the front yard. He knocked on the door. An armed security guard answered. He was relieved. At least Vicki had had the good sense to hire some protection. The guard patted him down, then went to get Vicki.

When she finally came, she looked drawn and thin. Her eyes were puffy, shell shocked—like the eyes he had seen in his own face when, purple bowtie hanging around his neck, he had finally realized she wasn't coming to their wedding.

"What are you doing here?" She showed no trace of human feeling. Everything that had ever happened between them seemed forgotten.

"I just wanted to say I'm sorry." His words caught like an old car starting on a subzero Minnesota morning.

"No, you're not. You're happy. I can see it in your eyes."

This stung, partly because it was half true. "I see a FOR SALE sign on the lawn."

"I'm moving back to Rochester." She glanced past his shoulder to his car. "Are you happy now?"

He didn't like the way she could so easily dismiss him, just as she had dismissed him sixteen years ago. Karma got the better of him, and he said something mean. "Merry Christmas, Vicki."

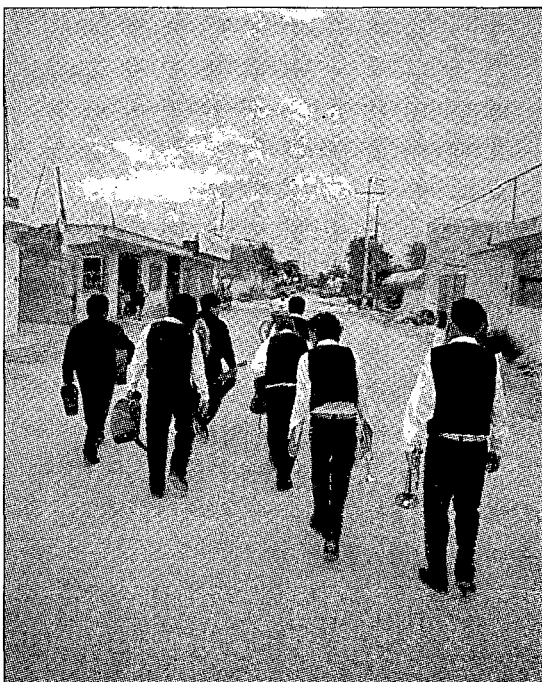
She said nothing. A moment later, she quietly closed the door.

He left her to her devastation, just as she had left him to his.

He got in his car and drove away. Snowflakes drifted from the sky, large ones that thudded into his windshield and disintegrated on impact. He glanced in his rearview mirror at the Osteen place. He would never come out here again. He turned his attention to the road ahead where, in the harbor below, he saw the Aerial Bridge, blurred by the blizzard, its girders faint in the thickening weather. He tried to concentrate on his wife and kids and the Christmas they would share in two days, but it didn't seem real. He remembered what Vicki had said about regret, and about murder on his hands.

And he had to wonder if she hadn't, after all, ruined his life a second time. 🐘

MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



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Band on the Run

We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "March Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit.

The winning entry for the September Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 140.

SET 'EM UP, JOE

DAVID EDGERLEY GATES

Arnold Rothstein, famously, was killed for welshing on a gambling debt. He was even more famous for his part in fixing the 1919 World Series, which is neither here nor there, but it's fair to say that Rothstein, more than any other, was the man responsible for the business model the Syndicate followed. The three men who took over his rackets were Benny Siegel, Charlie Luciano, and Frank Costello, and twenty years after Rothstein's murder, only Costello was still in power. Benny was dead, a victim of his own success, Las Vegas the twinkle in his eye, and when a .30 caliber round exited his head, an eyeball was later found on the carpet. Lucky Luciano had been deported—betrayed by Dewey, the Italians were wont to think—and although his influence was felt, first from Cuba, then from Sicily, Luciano was no longer a player. Costello, who got his start as a rum runner, financed by Rothstein, was now the most formidable mob boss in New York. Even after the Five Families gang war and the Kefauver hearings, Costello was *capo di tutti capi*.

Before the Italians, the Irish had run the city, but strong as we were still on the West Side, we labored in their shadow. Old Tim Hannah, the boss as was, had made accommodation, and Young Tim, who'd taken his father's place, understood necessity.

Not that it didn't chafe.

What has all this to do with the matter at hand? Well, it began with a card game, and a man who reneged on his debts. The rest is Fate.

I thought it no more than coincidence, but it was an unhappy mischance that the game was in a suite at the Park Central, Seventh and West 56th, the very hotel where Rothstein had been shot in 1928. I'd been summoned by a man named Dunnigan. He'd arranged what was known as a four-wall. Dunnigan provided the room and the amenities, the players ponied up for a buy-in of a thousand each. Professional dealers, in rotation, new decks with every dealer or on demand. The house took a small percentage of



Edward Kinsella III

every pot. There was an open bar, girls on call. You could probably find the same thing in any town in America from Galesburg, Illinois, to El Paso. The difference here was the stakes.

Poker is a game for five or six. Five of the men at the table were from out of town. The sixth man was Jimmy O'Donnell, known as Thin Jim. And he was winning.

No, it's not a setup, Dunnigan explained to me, off to the side. They asked to play Jimmy.

Because of his reputation, I suggested.

"They think they can beat him," Dunnigan said.

"And they're not," I said.

It was four in the morning, and the game had been going eight hours. It could go eight more, or eighteen, or eighty, as long as the money held out.

"If you can't identify the sucker in a card game inside the first hour, the sucker's probably you."

"One from St. Louis, one from Chicago, one from Baton Rouge," he said. "Some kind of lumber king from Bangor, Maine."

"Which of them is your problem?" I asked.

He tugged his ear, without pointing. "Guy sitting in first position, left of the dealer. Elyria, Ohio."

"Where the hell is Elyria, Ohio?"

"Who knows? I went through Cleveland on the train, once."

"Why's he a problem?"

"He's losing," Dunnigan said.

"He could lose in Ohio," I said.

"He's not a good loser," Dunnigan said.

"Is he being cheated?"

"I don't trust him to pay his losses."

"That's not what I asked."

Dunnigan looked at me. "I needed you here to stop trouble, not to keep me honest before God," he said.

"Give me five thousand dollars," I said.

There was a long pause before his jaw dropped. "What?"

"Are you running an honest game?" I asked. "I'm buying in. But not with my own money."

"Why don't you use Tim Hannah's money, you barstid?"

"This isn't Tim Hannah's game," I said.

"I asked you for *protection*," he said.

"And now you're paying for it," I said.

"I'm not paying for your entertainment," Dunnigan said.

"No, you're paying for an education," I told him.

Table stakes. Ten-dollar ante, fifty to open. There was a button that went around the table to indicate Dealer's Choice. They stuck pretty much to five card draw and seven stud, playing it high-low when Elyria's turn came around. He seemed to think it gave him better odds, although he was fifteen thousand in the hole. Thin Jim O'Donnell was taking half the pots.

It's a not uncommon phenomenon. Some big noise from Winnetka regularly beats his poker buddies back home, and when he goes on a business trip, he decides to try his skills against a professional. Problem being, O'Donnell was exactly that. He didn't play cards for recreation, he made his living at it, like another man might sell dry goods.

Baton Rouge took a bathroom break, and then decided he was going back to his room. He arranged with Dunnigan for a girl to meet him there.

Which left an open seat, and I was invited into the game.

Thin Jim O'Donnell knew who exactly I was, but he didn't let on, out of policy, or to protect his winnings.

We played half a dozen hands. I folded three, called twice, against better cards, and stayed in to win one. None of the pots went over a thousand, so my net loss was about five hundred of Dunnigan's money. I was trying to get a feel for the table, and the other men in the game.

There's a gambling maxim, attributed to Arnold Rothstein, that if you can't identify the sucker in a card game inside the first hour, then the sucker's probably you. In this case, it was Elyria. Baton Rouge had been more or less even when he left the table, and Bangor was keeping his head above water, but aside from Thin Jim, Chicago and St. Louis were the big winners.

Elyria's problem was that he chased with weak hands, in hopes they'd get better. It's not an unworkable strategy, but you have to read your opponents, and their cards, and know their own betting strategies. His was transparent. He'd bet out high and then check, or bet out higher after the next turn of the cards. Every once in a while, it worked, when he'd fill a stronger hand, but you can't win over the long run winning only one hand in a dozen, and he was a plunger. I took him for two hands running myself. He must have been used to buying the pot, back at the Elks or the K of C.

The other pattern didn't jump right out at me, not until we'd played a good three hours. O'Donnell, well versed in confidence tricks and skin games, would have caught on early, but he didn't call attention to it because it actually increased his percentage. I was a little slower on the uptake. St. Louis and Chicago were in cahoots.

It worked like this. In the first round of betting, both men would

bet out strong, if they held cards. Then the one with the better hand after the draw or showing on the board would check-raise, and the other one would fold, so they weren't going heads-up, or simply fattening the pot. It was subtle, and it only happened every four or five hands, when they both had cards worth betting. And it didn't mean the one who stayed would necessarily win, either, but it cut their losses, taken jointly, and increased their odds of winning. Together, they made up a third of the table. Out of ten hands, if O'Donnell took four or five, St. Louis and Chicago took three or four.

I wondered which of them had brought Elyria into the game.

At seven thirty the next morning, we took a break. Dunnigan had called down to room service for breakfast, and it was welcome.

The place was stale with cigar smoke and whiskey sweats, and feral energy, like a cage at the zoo. I went to the lavatory and splashed water on my face, washed my hands to get rid of the greasy card feel, and shook some talcum on them. I slipped my jacket off, and shucked out of my shoulder holster, and put them both on a hanger, but I tucked the .38 Super in the small of my back, in front of my shirttail, under my vest. I took out my cufflinks and rolled my sleeves up to the elbow. It was time to piss or get off the porcelain.

Baton Rouge was back, looking refreshed after getting his knob polished, ready to go at it again, but Bangor chose to drop out of the game. He'd played respectably and gotten good play for his money, probably losing no more than fifteen hundred over twelve hours. He shook hands with Dunnigan, and they settled up the tariff.

"I'll call you again when I'm in town, Francis," he said.

"At your convenience," Dunnigan said, smiling.

"Were you all strangers to one another before the game?" I asked.

The guy from Bangor gave me an odd look.

"Mickey's a friend who sits in from time to time," Dunnigan reassured him, pleasantly.

The guy from Bangor nodded. "I never met any of them," he said to me. "O'Donnell, well." He smiled ruefully. "I knew his name from table talk. Games up on the Hudson, north of 125th Street."

He meant the carpet joints. I was familiar with them.

"I mean you no disrespect, Francis," the guy from Bangor said, "but the next time you put me in a game, whether O'Donnell is part of it or not, leave those two out of it."

He didn't even incline his head, but Dunnigan and I both knew he meant the two guys from St. Louis and Chicago. I hadn't been the only one to notice.

"My apologies," Dunnigan said.

The guy shrugged philosophically. "You know what they say, Francis. If you play for more than you can afford to lose, you'll learn the game."

They shook hands again, and the guy from Bangor shook hands with me, too, and then he left.

It was time to get down to business.

We were all fortified with eggs Benedict and corned-beef hash, smoked salmon and pork sausages, some freshly opened oysters, of which I had six, the chafing dishes left behind for our delectation. I decided on my first drink of the day, a dram of Irish in a cup of hot coffee.

The new dealer cracked a fresh deck, fanned it on the felt, slipped out the jokers, and began his shuffle.

Playing until daylight is one thing. Playing *in* daylight is another. Dunnigan had drawn the curtains, and the hotel suite became suspended in time. It was a secret Benny Siegel had understood. If you go to Vegas nowadays, the casinos admit no natural light, they have no clocks, there's nothing to remind you that life is passing you by. All that counts is the click of the chips and the cards you're dealt. There's a philosophy. Every deal is a new chance to repair the damage done.

Five draw. I had three clubs, not in sequence, two cards off-suit. Under the button, I moved in for fifty. Baton Rouge called, St. Louis raised a hundred, Elyria called and raised another hundred, Chicago called and raised. The pot was at an even five hundred. I called and bumped it five hundred. They all called, and Elyria raised three hundred. I thought it was a dumb bet, signaling indifferent cards.

I called and raised a thousand.

Baton Rouge called. St. Louis folded. Elyria called. Again, not the right move. In his position, I would have raised it, all in. Chicago, of course, did exactly that. I called and raised him. We were now up to six thousand, and Baton Rouge folded. He had to bet to see new cards.

It was a lot of money for one pot. Make or break. Elyria did the uncharacteristic thing and folded.

I was heads-up with Chicago, just the two of us. I asked for two cards. He asked for two. I drew two spades, which gave me zero. I moved in with what was left of Dunnigan's money, three thousand, and reached back into my jacket, as if going for more capital, and he mucked his cards. I raked in the pot. He reached for my down cards. I slapped my hand down on his. "You pay to see the cards," I said.

"It's a showdown," he said.

"Only if you meet the bet," I said. I pushed all the cards together facedown and shoveled them toward the dealer.

Of course it was the correct etiquette. You bluff a guy out of his money, he doesn't get to see your method of play, but I'd done it as offensively as I knew how. I wanted him as an enemy, I wanted him to feel it personally. There are maybe a lot of ways to play

**I need you here to stop trouble, not
to keep me honest before God.**

cards, but the best way to win is to humiliate the guy you're playing.

Not only is it satisfying,

but the madder he gets, the more mistakes he makes. And in the end, you clean his clock.

Somebody once told me something about chess, as opposed to cards. Cards often depend on luck, but with chess, it's all about defining weakness. When you beat somebody at chess, you *crush* them, they have no excuse. With cards, there's always the chance they'll pull it out because they beat the odds.

It wasn't true for Elyria, who kept losing, and it wasn't true for Chicago and St. Louis because I made sure they kept on losing. Poker is a cumulative game, and in the end, the house odds work against you. Thin Jim O'Donnell was a better poker player than the amateurs from out of town, and he was a better poker player than I was, but the two of us were better than they were. I'd managed to reduce Elyria's loss to twelve thousand.

"You're not doing him any favors," O'Donnell said.

"A fool and his money are soon parted," I agreed.

It was five o'clock that afternoon. O'Donnell was ahead an easy thirty grand. "What does it matter?" he asked.

"Dunnigan has a name for not running a crooked game."

"I don't understand your stake in this, Mickey," he said.

"I might come away with a little something," I said.

"What do you want from *me*?" he asked.

I hadn't understood him right away. "Ach," I said. "I'm not expecting a piece of your action, Jimmy. You make whatever you can, as long as it's honest work. I'm not here for that. I came for Francis."

"Why would you be doing a favor for Frank Dunnigan?"

I shrugged. "One hand washes the other," I said. The truth is, I wasn't quite sure. It meant nothing to me, who won or lost the game. It wasn't about fairness. There's little fairness in this world, after all. No. The simple fact is that I wanted to rub their noses in the dirt, the two cheats.

"Let's play some cards," O'Donnell said.

We went back to the table and settled into our seats again. The pace was telling on all of us, and lack of sleep. The button was in front of Elyria, and he called his favorite, seven stud, high-low.

Two cards down, one up. Elyria's face card was an ace, and so was mine. He bet out fifty. The table called around to me, and I raised a hundred. The table called around to Elyria, with the pot now at six hundred, and he raised me full. The others called, and I raised a thousand. Elyria called and went in for another fifteen hundred. The pot stood at four thousand, with only the first three cards dealt. Thin Jim O'Donnell folded. I called. Baton Rouge called. So did St. Louis and Chicago.

"Pot's right," the dealer said, and dealt the next card up.

Baton Rouge paired with sixes, and St. Louis paired with kings. Chicago was showing four-five of clubs. Elyria caught a deuce to his ace, both diamonds. I was dealt a ten off-suit. No help, but my hole cards were ace-ten, so I was sitting on two pair.

St. Louis checked. If it was a signal, his partner paid it no attention and bet five hundred. Elyria called. I thought it funny he didn't raise. Chicago was looking at low hand, I figured, but Elyria might be paired up with his ace, and it was uncharacteristic of him to be sandbagging. I called. Baton Rouge folded his sixes. St. Louis raised a thousand. It was an obvious signal, now, but Chicago ignored it again, called, and raised fifteen hundred. Elyria called, and raised it all the way, seventy-five hundred, the amount of the pot. There was now fifteen thousand dollars on the table. I pretended to think about it, and then simply called. St. Louis looked at the cards on the board, his thoughtfulness no pretense. If he had a set of kings, and Chicago had a lock on low, and they could keep me and Elyria betting up the stakes, they'd split a thirty-grand pot. He called. Chicago made the same calculation, but quicker than his partner, and called.

"Pot's right," the dealer said.

St. Louis drew a queen, off-suit, Chicago the five of hearts, pairing up low. Elyria pulled the five of diamonds, for a possible flush, and I drew the ten of spades.

St. Louis was still high, with kings. He checked. Chicago checked. Elyria checked as well.

I was surprised. It was the smartest poker move he'd made all night. He was looking at a flush draw, or a solid low. I had a full house, but tens over, not aces. I'd figured St. Louis for a set of kings already. If he paired a kicker, I was dead meat. I bet ten thousand dollars.

The hand was going to be all in now.

St. Louis called, a sign he had the three kings but not the full boat. Or he was trying to sucker me.

Chicago hesitated and then called, pushing in the rest of his chips. Maybe he had doubts, but he remembered he'd get half of whatever St. Louis won, under the table.

Elyria called and raised ten thousand. It was the second smartest bet he'd made in almost twenty-four hours. He was either going to lose his shirt—and his pants, and maybe his livelihood—or he was going to bust the game. I looked over at Thin Jim O'Donnell, who was smiling behind his hand.

I called the bet. I had a hundred dollars left in front of me, and I didn't know whether Dunnigan would front me more.

St. Louis and Chicago stared at each other, their poker faces gone. You could see it in their eyes. In for a penny, in for a pound. They had to call or Elyria would have bought the pot. They both called, but they had to go light, the chips half in, half out. The pot was at sixty-five thousand dollars.

Fourth face card. St. Louis got the nine of hearts, and Chicago the three of clubs. Elyria caught another diamond, the five. I drew the fourth ace, which put me high, meaning I'd bet first..

I turned and glanced back at Dunnigan. He nodded, but he wasn't happy. Full house, aces up? I bet twenty-five thousand.

St. Louis folded his kings. It was too rich to chase.

Chicago smiled confidently and called the bet.

Elyria thought about it, taking his time.

I asked for a whiskey from the bar, Tullamore Dew, no water and no ice.

"All in," Elyria said. "And raise it fifty thousand."

Everything stopped momentarily.

I looked at Dunnigan again. He nodded again, as unhappy as the last time. I called.

Now it was Chicago's turn to look at Dunnigan. Was his marker good? the look asked. Dunnigan nodded. Chicago sat back in his chair and flipped up the edges of his hole cards, as if he hadn't already made up his mind, and then he called. The pot was now close to two hundred thousand dollars.

Arnold Rothstein, in this same hotel, had walked away from the game that cost him his life owing three hundred thousand, on the turn of a card.

The last card was dealt facedown.

I was high, showing. I checked.

Chicago bet out fifty thousand dollars.

Elyria smiled ruefully. He hadn't even looked at his card. He called.

So did I. It was called limping in.

The pot stood at three hundred and fifty thousand.

Now, here's the thing in high-low. There's a last round of betting, after you declare which way you're going. An empty hand for low, one chip for high, two chips for both ways.

We each shuffled a handful of chips below the table. I had a chip in my hand for high. We brought our hands up and opened them. Chicago and Elyria each showed two chips. Both of them were going both ways. What it means is, out of seven cards, you can show high hand, and low, and win each way.

I had high hand, with the full house, aces over. The other two were showing flush, and the possible low.

It's a courtesy that you don't raise into a lock, and I didn't. I checked. Elyria bet a hundred thousand dollars. The pot was shy just half a million when Chicago called.

He turned over a flush in clubs, his high card the six. If you switched in his five of hearts, he had a six-five low.

Elyria almost apologetically turned over a straight flush in diamonds to the five, his off-suit card a six, for a six-four low. He'd beaten Chicago both ways, and my full house.

At least it wasn't my money.

Play for more than you can afford to lose, and you'll learn the game, the guy from Bangor had said.

I ran into Thin Jim O'Donnell at Jack Sharkey's a week after. He shook my hand as if genuinely glad to see me. I believe he was. "How'd you know to stay out of that last hand?" I asked.

"I didn't have the cards," he said.

I smiled. "You folded too early," I said.

He shrugged. "The fix was in," he said.

"You knew?"

"No," he said. "I wouldn't have sat in the game, else."

"But once the game started."

"Once the game started, how not?"

"You had every opportunity to leave," I said.

"I don't go to a card game to lose," he said.

"Who does?"

O'Donnell laughed. "You had aces up," he said.

"You saw it coming. I didn't."

He nodded. "On the declaration," he said.

"Because the guy's betting was so erratic, and so reckless, it looked like a stone bluff, or impossible odds."

"No, you made a good bet. I'd have played it the same way, but I wouldn't have bet the club flush." Chicago's hand.

"He didn't read me for the full house, three aces up on the table," I said. I didn't mention I'd had the tens.

"Well, his attention was fixed elsewhere. He'd led himself to believe he'd been handed a pigeon, ripe for the plucking."

"Poetic justice. Plucked by the mark from Ohio."

"Ohio?" O'Donnell shook his head, smiling. "Mickey, the *marks* were those two guys running the con, the high-rollers from Missouri and Chicago."

"Dunnigan set them up?" I'd fallen behind there.

"Certain sure."

"Why did he ask us into the game, then?"

"Window dressing. We were beards."

"I don't see it," I said.

"Dunnigan brought you into the game so it wouldn't look like a shakedown," he said. "What did he tell you, that he was afraid the guy wouldn't meet his markers?"

"Something to that effect, more or less," I admitted. "And what did he tell you?"

"I was local color. Some visiting firemen wanted to play a pro. Why wouldn't I jump at it?"

"Who was the ringer, then? The hayseed from Elyria."

"I never saw him before. I'm thinking Reno, or Lake Tahoe. Side games, hotel rooms. Not the casinos."

"Why not Vegas?"

"Too much of a known quantity. You might recognize him, or his style of play."

"The guy didn't *have* a style of play."

"I'll know him the next time," O'Donnell said, smiling.

"So it didn't matter that I lost Dunnigan's money," I said. "He was going to get it back, with interest."

"I'm thinking a three-way split," he said. "A third to the house, a third to the mechanic, a third to the loan sharks."

"Which loan sharks?" I asked.

"Whichever of Costello's people Dunnigan is into. He's got markers out all over town."

I still didn't quite understand the sequence of events, but I suppose it didn't matter. I'd only played a walk-on part.

Others got top billing.

Frank Dunnigan paid for his education. They fished him out of the East River later that same week. It didn't make sense, not if he were paying down a debt, but maybe it wasn't the Mafia who dropped him in the drink.

The man from Chicago had gotten on the Lakeshore Limited. There was a stop in Cleveland, and he was found dead in the compartment of his Pullman. Heart attack, or stroke, an unfortunate

accident. He was known to have had health problems previously.

The guy from St. Louis died in a colored whorehouse in East St. Louis, just across the river in Illinois, from an overdose of cocaine, but it was covered up for his family's sake, with the collusion of local authorities. He was a judge, and perhaps his associates were able to call in a final favor.

The mob has a long reach.

O'Donnell had walked away with over thirty thousand, a fair day's wages. Nobody ever questioned it.

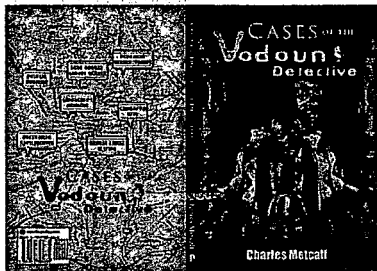
I'd walked away with the shirt on my back, but I'd expected nothing.

The winner had left town without consequence. A hundred and fifty thousand dollars isn't chump change, if that in fact was his end, and I had no reason to doubt Thin Jim O'Donnell. On the other hand, I didn't imagine we'd see the man from Elyria in a New York neighborhood anytime in the near future.

Not that he could have found Ohio on a map. ♪

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THE FINAL CATCH

BRENDAN DUBOIS

The day started with me arriving at four A.M. at a dock in Tyler Harbor, New Hampshire, to do a newspaper feature story about a local fisherman. The day ended with me being under arrest by the Tyler Police Department. And in between, there was a lot of fishing, a lot of sitting around on a bobbing boat on the Atlantic Ocean, and a drowning. And in the end, a serious look at who I am and where I was going.

But I'm getting ahead of myself and my story, which would no doubt upset my journalism professors, thinking they had taught me better.

So back to the beginning.

Well, part of the beginning. That year I was a junior at the University of New Hampshire in Durham, studying journalism, and like most everyone in my class, I wanted a summer newspaper internship to gain experience, gain clips for the ol' resumé, and get higher up that ladder of eventual fresh-faced college graduates, so I could get hired before anyone else. So I started at the top of the food chain for summer internship applications, in the middle of winter to get a jump on the competition, thinking that being a lower-middle class white girl from a single parent household in a small town would give me a leg up. I started off, of course, with the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, then worked a bit down to the *Los Angeles Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, and the *Boston Globe*, and then down to the "C" list, *Miami Herald*, *Newsday*, and the *Dallas Evening News*.

And now I was here, at Tyler Beach.

At a small town newspaper that headed the "G" list.

Not much of a jump. Should have started a year earlier. Or maybe being a lower-middle class white girl from a single parent household in a small town didn't have as much pull anymore. Who knew? I suppose I should have been grateful that it hadn't come to the point that intern managers demanded a cotton swab DNA test and a credit report, but I wasn't much for being grateful.

So here I was, at the *Tyler Chronicle*, in the summertime, barely making enough money to rent a studio apartment on the other side of town and writing cheerful stories about the chowder festival, the Miss Tyler Beach contest, and the sand castle competition, knowing that if I had taken a waitressing job with a skirt up to there and cleavage down to there, it would have gained me a lot more money at the end of the summer.

But it was hard-hitting clips I was after, and so far none of the clips I had really stood out. Just one story could make a huge difference in one's career, and that was the story I was looking for, something with power. If I had been able to cover the police department at Tyler Beach, I would have had a slew of juicy stuff about fights and drug busts and DWI arrests of Massachusetts politicians, but the police beat—known for some strange reason as “the cop shop”—belonged to a cheerful yet rough and tough blond reporter named Paula Quinn, who smiled sweetly at me the first day of my internship and took me aside and made a little list. Tyler and Tyler Beach headed the list, and underneath, Paula had written Police, Fire, and Town Government.

Then Paula had smiled sweetly at me and said, “That’s my beat, Jenny. It belongs to me. You can write anything else about Tyler and Tyler Beach. But if you come play in my yard, I’ll break your arms. Understood?”

I said sure, and bit off a statement about how I was so happy that she was supporting the Sisterhood, for it seemed to me that Paula wasn’t one for abstract theories about feminism and support groups and moving one’s cheese.

I did the best I could, till one day I saw a letter to the editor of the *Tyler Chronicle* complaining about new federal fishing regulations. The letter writer said something to the effect that if more people knew what a fisherman had to put up with, well, maybe they and the politicians they elected would be a bit smarter.

So. An idea. What the heck did I—or most people in the *Chronicle’s* readership—know about the day-to-day life of a fisherman? Off to the editor I went—Rollie Grandmaison is a glum man, who I think is color-blind, for all he wears is black slacks, white shirts, and black neckties—and told him what I wanted to do.

“I see a three-part series,” I said. “Nice spread in the middle of the papers, lots of pics, each story tells a different tale. Part one, the past history of commercial fishing out of Tyler; part two, the present state of fishing; and part three—”

“I can guess what part three is about,” Rollie interrupted me. “The future of fishing, right?”

I eagerly nodded. At last, an editor who understood me. Rollie

shook his head. "Shrink it into one story, you take the pics, and get it on my desk by next Monday. Got it?"

I nodded again. Not so eagerly. "Got it."

The letter writer's name was Jack Houlihan. There was one Jack Houlihan in the phone book—shared with a Helen Houlihan—and I called and left a message.

No answer after two days.

On the third day, I tried again, and after the phone had rung twelve times, it was picked up and a male voice answered with a string of obscenities before hanging up the phone.

But still wanting those nice clips, I called a day after that, later in the day, and got the same male voice. After a pause he said, "Hey, was that you calling yesterday?"

Hesitating but deciding the truth would probably work in my favor, I said, yes, it had been.

Then he laughed and said, "Sorry about chewing you out. I'd been out two days, got back, and was having my first real good sleep when you called. Teach me next time to do a better job of disconnecting the phone. So you really want to do a story about me and fishing. Right?"

I said yes and started giving him an explanation of why I thought this story would work, when he interrupted me and said, "Cripes, I guess that's what happens when you get a letter published. You get attention. Sure, if you want to. Meet me at the west end of the town pier, mooring five. Dress warm, and, oh, if you're prone to seasickness, take one of those antimotion-sickness pills."

"Great," I said. "What time?"

"Four A.M."

I think I choked a bit. "Four A.M.?"

"Sure," he said, laughing. "Always need to get a good jump on things. I'll see you there. Name of the boat is the *Helen H.*"

So, four A.M. at Tyler Harbor. The calendar said it was late June, but the dark sky and temperature said it was late October. Jack Houlihan hadn't given me specifics about what dress warm meant, but I figured it out some. Sneakers and slacks and no skirt. Shirt and sweater. Jacket. Baseball cap. Reporter's notebook stuck in a back pocket, digital camera hanging from my shoulder, my purse shoved under a seat in my locked car, small knapsack with a couple of sandwiches and a fruit drink for later.

But on the dock, shivering, I thought, damn. Gloves. Should have brought gloves. The wind was coming off hard from the harbor, and I pushed my bare hands into my jacket's pockets. Before

me were the waters of the harbor and plenty of moored boats. The dock was empty. There was nothing moored by the large painted numeral 5. I wondered where in hell my fisherman had gone off to. Next to my little car was a big pickup truck with a bumper sticker that read FISHERMEN EAT BETTER, and a vanity plate that said HULIHAN. Even with my minimal experience as a reporter, I determined that this truck probably belonged to my source. The truck and my car were parked under a streetlight. I peered inside and saw some Dunkin' Donuts bags crumpled up and an open ashtray with some butts. I sniffed—fresh tobacco smoke. So he'd been here a while ago. A couple of other vehicles were parked farther down the lot, including a black Harley-Davidson motorcycle, so at least some people were out there in the harbor.

But where was he now?

I stamped my feet. Waited some more. Out on the harbor there were some lights from the moored boats, some of them lobster boats, others that were larger, but no sailboats. Tyler Harbor was a working harbor; there didn't seem to be any room here for aspiring yachtsmen. Out beyond the harbor were the flat salt marshes and the low lights of the town of Falconer, and off in the distance as well, the bright orange lights from the Falconer nuclear power plant, merrily splitting atoms and making electricity for all concerned.

I checked my watch. Just after four A.M.

It looked like I had been stood up. Then I remembered: Earlier I had called Jack and had woken him up. Maybe getting me out here in the harbor was his way of getting even.

A growling noise. I looked back out to the harbor. One of the fishing boats was making its way out of the harbor, heading to the channel on the left that eventually led out to the Atlantic Ocean. It had a small cabin or wheelhouse up forward, and a derricklike contraption on the rear that looked like it held a giant ball of twine. I kept on staring until the boat swung around, started heading in my direction, to the dock. Red and green running lights were illuminated on the boat, and then a spotlight burst out a beam of light that nailed me and the surrounding ten feet or so. The diesel engines growled as they were throttled back and the boat, which seemed to be heading out at a good clip of speed, came gently up to the dock. I stepped forward and there was a man's voice coming from the main cabin.

"Jenny Wilson?"

"That's right," I said.

"Then come on board," the voice said. "It's time to go fishing."

So I made that tiny leap from the dock to the boat, the tiny leap

that was going to change so many things.

The first thing I noticed was the smell of salt and dead fish and other nasty things. The second thing I noticed was that the damn floor wouldn't keep still. I made my way to the cabin and went through a sliding door. Inside the small cabin were two men, one on the right, sitting on a chair, looking forward through the window, a console of sorts before him, including the ship's wheel. The other guy was sprawled out on a padded bench on the other side of the cabin, a Dunkin' Donuts take-out coffee cup in his hand.

The guy on the chair turned, offered a hand, which I promptly shook. "Jack Houlihan," he said. "That lazy slug over there is Bert Cornstock, my supposed first mate. Welcome aboard the *Helen H.*"

"Thanks," I said, trying to keep my balance as the boat rocked some. Jack was tall and lanky, with a thin mustache and thin blond hair and glasses. Bert was about a foot shorter, with a thick black beard and slicked-back hair. They both wore blue jeans, gray sweatshirts, and knee-high rubber boots. The floor seemed to be slick cement or something similar.

At Jack's elbow was a throttle, which he eased out. We were heading out of the channel, going under the Tyler Harbor Bridge; before us was the dark water of the Atlantic. Jack pushed the throttle out some more, and soon after we left the confines of the channel we were out in the ocean itself, and the boat started bucking, going up and down, up and down. I grabbed onto the rear of Jack's captain's chair to keep myself up, and he said, "How are you doing?"

"Doing okay, I guess," I said, swallowing, glad that I had taken that antmotion-sickness pill that morning with a slug of orange juice. "How . . . how long before you get to where you'll do your fishing?"

"Oh, about an hour or so. Just an hour of steady cruising, about north-northeast, up to the Gulf of Maine."

I looked around the small cabin and something struck me. I hesitated for a moment, for I didn't want to act too scared or too childish, but as one of my professors had once said, there are no stupid questions. Just stupid reporters, afraid to ask them.

"Um, I'm sorry, but I'm not much of a swimmer. Where are the life jackets?"

Jack laughed and his first mate Bert grinned at me. Jack said, "Sorry, don't mean to make light of it. Life jackets are necessary, but we don't wear them. They're bulky and they get in the way. Bert, show our guest where the life jackets are."

Bert got up from the padded bench and lifted the seat. Underneath were a handful of bright orange life jackets.

Jack said, "There's a couple of life rings out on the deck, but don't worry. I've been fishing for nearly twenty years and haven't gotten my feet wet yet!"

His first mate let the seat lid fall with a thump. "Always a first time, Jack. Always a first time."

Jack laughed and I decided, in the dim light of the wheelhouse, that this was as good a time to start the interview, which is what I did as we motored out into the Atlantic. I got the basics of Jack and his life: Grew up in Tyler. Local schools. Dad was a lobsterman. Worked summers for Dad. Dad had big plans for him, so off he went to college. Got a degree in oceanography, and then his master's. Was working toward his doctorate one year when his brain froze. Couldn't think much anymore. Came back to Tyler, borrowed a boat, spent the day on the ocean. Decided a day on the water was better than any day in a classroom. Married Helen, his college sweetheart. No kids, not yet. Scrimped and saved and mortgaged a lot, now had his own boat, a forty-four-foot stern-trawler. Bert was a neighbor friend, worked lots of odd jobs, not one for settling down. Sometimes Jack's dad, now retired from lobstering, came aboard to help out. Fished cod and flounder in the spring and fall, shrimp in the winter.

My hand was cramped from writing so fast and furious. I looked up and said, "Enough to make a living?"

That earned me a laugh from the both of them. And then Jack went into a long lecture about state and federal fishing regulations, about how some fishing grounds were off-limits one year, opened in another, and how regulations determining what you could catch and how much you could catch sometimes didn't correlate to the actual behavior of the species. How fishing grounds you knew were plentiful were off-limits, forcing you to go farther and farther out into the Gulf, and how the cost of fuel, and insurance, and fuel, and more insurance, kept on rising and rising, and how each year, more and more fishermen would just give up and sell their boats.

Then he took a breath and I took my chance.

"So why do you put up with it?" I asked.

He motioned to the front windscreen. "Where else would I get to see this, day after day?"

I looked to where he was pointing, to the sunrise over the Atlantic Ocean. It was the damndest thing. While I had been interviewing Jack, I had looked out every now and then and saw only darkness. Toward the stern of the boat, I could make out the lights of Tyler Beach, and then, as we went farther out, the lights of the New Hampshire seacoast. But it had felt like we had been hurtling out into darkness, bouncing up and down.

At first there was a hint of deep red and orange on the horizon, then everything came into view, and the red and orange became a ruddy gold and yellow. I could make out the gentle swells of the ocean, a few seagulls weaving and bobbing overhead, and the wide, wonderful, and wild ocean about us.

I nodded. "I see what you mean."

With the engine idling in neutral, Jack and Bert went out to the rear deck. On either side of the derricklike structure that was holding the large bale of twine, which I now recognized was a fishing net stored in a large roll, were flat pieces of wood that looked to be the size of barn doors. Working with just a few grunts and "okay, now, okay?" the slabs of wood were unlocked and dropped over the sides with large splashes of water. By then I had my digital camera out and was taking a series of photos. Jack then sprinted back to the cabin, and in a matter of seconds, came the whining noise of a winch engine letting loose. Cables attached to the slabs of wood started running out, as did a green mesh net. As the net was unrolled over the stern, I was struck by a fresh smell of dead things, and I saw why: Bits and pieces of dried fish were still stuck in the net.

I watched Bert keeping his eye on the unrolling net and was startled to find Jack standing next to me. "Ready for a quick lesson?" he asked.

"Yes, I am."

"Those two pieces of wood—" He pointed to either side of the boat. "—they act like wings down there, under the water, helping the net stay open. The net drops back and those pieces of wood keep everything open as we move forward. It's like a large balloon down there."

"Okay."

"We trawl and the fish swim into the net, and when we're ready, we slowly bring everything up. The net gradually closes, and then, boom!, everything's brought aboard."

"Then what?" I asked.

He grinned. "Then you'll see the real work begin."

"I see." I took a few more photos and then looked back to Jack. "How long do you trawl, then?"

"Oh, not long," he said, making his way back to the cabin. "Two hours."

Two hours!

And how many trawls do you do?"

"Today? We'll do three."

And with that, he was back in the main cabin.

I looked behind us, to the straining cables, seeing the sun rise higher up in the sky.

Two hours per trawl. Total of six hours. Not to mention the time to open up the net, clean and sort the fish, and—

Christ, I thought. Any way you looked at it, it was going to be a very long day.

I went forward to join Jack in the cabin.

Two hours. Jack kept the boat at a steady speed and course, keeping an eye on the performance of the engines, while his first mate Bert either bustled around or sometimes stretched out for little catnaps. I interviewed Jack for another twenty minutes or so and then stopped bothering the man. I couldn't think of any more questions to ask him.

Perhaps taking pity on me, he explained some of the gear in the crowded cabin. There was a radio, a radar set, and an odd piece of equipment that was called a fishfinder. It had a square screen that displayed a lot of squiggly green lines, and Jack claimed that he could tell where schools of fish were located, at what depth, and the direction in which they were swimming. I nodded in all the right places and promptly forgot everything he told me. Above the fishfinder, a couple of photographs were taped to the wall. The photos showed a busty blonde with a wide, easy grin. In one photo she was wearing a bikini, and in the other, she looked to be at a pool party, in a black cocktail dress, a bottle of beer and a cigarette in her hand.

Jack noticed me eyeing the pictures. "That's my better half, Helen."

I nodded. "Boat named after her?"

"Of course," he said. "Wouldn't have it any other way."

I looked through my notebook and went outside for some fresh air and found Bert sitting up forward, leaning against a hatch on the bulkhead, stretching his legs out.

Maybe time for a change. I started to ask him questions and then found that he was pretty good at deflecting them. Grew up in Tyler. Local schools. Knocked around a bit. What does that mean? Oh, the usual. Here and there. Loved motorcycles. Did you see my Harley, parked there on the dock? Did you? Good. Always liked to fish. Worked a number of boats. Ended up here with Jack. Nice to be on a little boat without a big crew to get in the way. And . . .

"Excuse me?" I asked.

Bert grinned. "You heard what I said."

I paused. "Well . . . I can't believe you would ask me if I'm seeing anyone. Are you putting the moves on me?"

He shrugged his thick shoulders. "Whatever you call it. You're good lookin', I'm reasonably lookin'. Not many attachments on my part. Fast bike, little apartment, fast women . . . that's the kind of life I like. No harm in asking, is there?"

A little shudder raced through me. It came to me just how vulnerable I was, out here on this boat with these two men. Who knew I was out here? Rollie, my editor—and I wasn't sure how on the ball he was when it came to my presence. Anything could happen to me out here with these two. How much did I know about them? Despite having interviewed them, they were still pretty much a blank slate. They could, well, do anything, and if push came to shove, it was a pretty wide and deep ocean out here.

I shuddered again. "I need to go see Jack again."

Bert smirked. "Does that mean no?"

"Yes, very much so."

But I didn't have to go into the cabin, for Jack was coming out, slipping on a pair of heavy work gloves. "Come along, Bert," he said. "It's time."

Jack went to the rear of the cabin to a set of controls, and there came the sound of the winch turning, its noise loud and whining. The cables grew taut as they started coming up the drum, salt-water dripping off as they rose from the ocean. He and Bert kept their eyes on the cables, and I watched the ocean, another chill coming over me. It seemed . . . spooky. Scores of feet beneath us a giant net was closing in on schools of fish, and in minutes, many of these fish would be dead. Oh, I'm no vegetarian, not by a long shot, but it still gave me the creeps to see all these things alive down there that would shortly be dead.

As the cables came up on the rotating drum, I took photographs of Bert and Jack at work, and once Bert winked at me, so I resigned myself to thinking that he'd put the moves on me again before the day was out. But that was many, many hours away.

Jack called out to me. "Ready to see something strange?"

"Sure," I said.

"See any seagulls around?"

I looked around at the sky. "Not a one."

Jack smiled, hands still on the winch controls. "Just you wait."

I didn't know what he meant, but pretty soon, one seagull showed up, hovering over the stern of the boat, and then there was another, and another, and within five to ten minutes there was a squadron of seagulls over the stern of the boat, wheeling and crying and squawking. I looked to Jack and he threw up his hands and laughed. "Nobody knows how they do that. It's like they're psy-

chic or something. When it comes time to bring up the net, it's like they come out of nowhere."

Bert called out, "Here she comes!" and there was a roiling in the water as the full net came up at the stern. The winch seemed to whine even more as the bulging net broke water, and I stopped taking photographs for just a moment, watching how Jack and Bert worked together, like members of a sports team. They went to the full net, alive with things turning and flipping, and pulled it in close to the boat, so it was hung over the empty rear deck. Then some work with wrenches from an open toolbox and—*Plop!*—the bottom of the net opened and Bert and Jack were up to their knees in fish skittering and bouncing around on the deck. They reached up and pulled off some fish that were caught in the netting, and in a few more minutes, the net was rolled up and out of the way.

Then the two of them bent down and got to work. They worked quickly, tossing over chunks of seaweed and other debris, sorting the fish, putting some into one plastic container, others in a different container. Then the long knives came out, and without saying anything at all, Jack and Bert cut off the heads of what I recognized as cod, flushing out the guts with hoses. The cleaned fish were then placed into neat piles in large tubs with ice.

Bert looked up at me and said, "Here, catch!" And he tossed something at me, which I caught. It was cool and small and gray and pulsed in my hand. Bert smirked and said, "Heart from a cod. Still beating."

I swallowed. "Cool." And I tossed it back at him, and he laughed and caught it one-handed and then tossed it over the side.

More work on their part, more photographs on my part, then Jack and Bert went back to the net and closed up the opening. Back at the wheelhouse I asked Jack, "Well, how was it?"

"Not bad," he said. "But we're going to head off to the east for a bit, try our luck somewhere else."

We never made it there.

This is how it happened.

By now I was drowsy from having been up so early and having taken the antimotion-sickness pill, and I stretched out on the padded bench in the wheelhouse to rest my eyes. Bert had gone forward to sun himself from the bow of the boat, while Jack worked the steering and listened to the radio. The idle chatter on the radio from other fishermen out there, the drone of the diesels, and the gentle rise and fall of the boat made my eyes heavy, so I

stretched out, pulled my baseball cap down over my eyes, and dozed, though at one point, I made out a change in the pitch of the engine as Jack adjusted the speed. Still, I kept my eyes closed.

I know, dozing while doing a story. Probably grounds for being put in front of a firing squad of opinion columnists from the *New York Times*, if any of them could be bothered to put their precious hands around a firearm, but I was tired, I had taken scores of photos, and filled half a notebook with my interviews with Jack and Bert. I had enough information to write a novella, no matter a newspaper story

Then, a thump.

Jack's voice, "What the—?"

And then a slam, as he pulled open the sliding door, and I heard him yelling, "Bert! Bert! Where the hell are you?"

Now I was sitting up, rubbing at my face, as Jack flew back into the wheelhouse, slammed the throttles to neutral and looked at me, face white. "Bert's fallen off. I can't spot him!"

I scrambled off the bench and came out to follow Jack as he moved around the bow, leaning over, and he turned to me and said, "He stood up and we hit a wave. He fell off. I think he hit his head on the way over. Hey, Bert! Bert!"

No answer.

I didn't know what to say, what to do. Jack looked to me and said, "Run aft, grab a life ring, tell me if you see anything. Hurry!"

I made my way back to the stern as quickly as possible, taking an orange life ring off the side of the wheelhouse. It said F/V HELEN H TYLER N.H. in big black letters.

I looked along the side and to the rear. Nothing. Just swells of dark gray water.

A yell from up forward. "Do you see anything?"

"No!" I yelled back, the life ring heavy and awkward in my hand, still looking out onto the waters, part of me thinking, nope, this can't be happening, this so cannot be happening. Bert has to pop up in a second or two, wave in my direction, so I can toss the ring out. Nope, this cannot be happening.

He couldn't be gone just like that.

I heard Jack moving back into the wheelhouse, and I dropped the life ring on the stern and joined him as he brought down the microphone to his radio, spun the dial to a certain channel, and started speaking in a slow, clear voice. "Porter Coast Guard, Porter Coast Guard, this is fishing vessel *Helen H.*, fishing vessel *Helen H.*, we have a man overboard at coordinates—" He looked at another display, a little GPS screen by the fishfinder, and read off the longitude and latitude, repeating his message. "Porter Coast

Guard, Porter Coast Guard, this is fishing vessel *Helen H.*, fishing vessel *Helen H.*, we have a man overboard . . .”

Then the Coast Guard came back to him, acknowledging the message. Jack put the microphone down for a second, reached under the console, slapped a pair of black binoculars in my hands. Jack looked again to me, face still pale, and said, “I’m going to motor in a slow circle, keep within the coordinates. You go out on the bow and keep a sharp eye. Okay? Damn it, maybe I ran him down, chewed him up with the prop, damn it! Look, yell out if you see something, *anything*, even if it looks like a scrap of cloth. Go!”

So there I was, no longer a newspaper reporter but an unwitting member of the *Helen H.* crew. I stood out there on the bow, binoculars in hand, looking out at the slowly moving but oh-so-unforgiving ocean.

Nothing.

My heart was hammering so hard I thought my throat would choke up. While Jack moved the fishing boat in a slow circle, I scanned the waters, seeing nothing, nothing at all.

After a while other boats began to appear, lobster boats and stern trawlers like the *Helen H.*, even a couple of fishing party boats, chock full of tourists leaning over the railings, all of us looking for poor Bert. No doubt the other craft had heard Jack’s message and had motored over to help—at least out here on the ocean, the basic rules of survival and assistance still ruled.

The binoculars seemed to grow heavier with every passing minute, and still, none of us could find a thing. Despite it all, I took photo after photo, while still using the binoculars to scan the waters. After a while, a bright orange and white helicopter from the Coast Guard station up the coast at Porter arrived, scanning from overhead, and eventually it was joined by a small patrol boat, but even the intercession of the Coast Guard couldn’t help.

Bert was gone.

And as the day dragged on, Jack in his wheelhouse with his thoughts and me out on the bow with my own, I looked down and against the dull white fiberglass, saw a smear of brown.

A bloodstain, where poor Bert had struck his head while going overboard.

I stood there, legs trembling, knowing that somehow I would have to write this story up, and not sure if I had it in me.

At dusk we motored back to Tyler Harbor. I sat on the padded bench, exhausted, legs and hands trembling, and Jack kept quiet, just staring ahead. Only once did he say anything, when he shook

his head and said, "God . . . at least he has no family . . . nobody I have to tell . . . sweet Jesus . . ."

We went through the channel to the harbor, from where we had motored out more than twelve hours ago. I suppose I should have been hungry or thirsty, but I was just so damn tired. I just wanted to make it to the dock, climb in my car, and drive to my little one-room apartment and collapse.

But other people had other plans.

There was a crowd at the dock as we approached and the flashing lights of police cruisers and the harsh glare of a camera-held light, which meant a television crew had arrived. Jack cursed as we motored up to the dock. He looked to me, grabbed my hands, and said, "Look, usually . . . Bert, he handles the lines, but I'm going to need your help. Just hold the wheel steady, and when I yell out 'Now,' pull the throttle back to here, neutral. Got it?"

I nodded and he went outside. As I held the wheel, I saw him toss out mooring lines to the men on the dock who wanted to help. Then I heard him yell out "Now!" and I pulled the throttle back to neutral, just like he said. Jack came back and his eyes were red rimmed; like he had been quietly weeping on the way back into the harbor. He just stood there for a moment, shook his head, and said, "Now the real fun begins."

A group of people came aboard the boat, talking, questioning, hugging Jack. I saw a familiar face, the woman in the photo in the wheelhouse, Helen. Jack's shoulders shook as she gave him a big hug. I couldn't wait to get the hell off that boat, so I grabbed my gear and stepped up out onto the dock, my legs quivering now that I was on stable land, and I went to my car, opened the passenger side door, and tossed my gear in. I closed the door and was going around to the other side when I was stopped by a Tyler police officer in a dark green uniform.

"Ma'am, you were on the boat, weren't you?" he asked politely.

"Yeah, I was."

"Then my detective wants to talk to you. Will you come here, please?"

"Sure." I was too tired to do almost anything else.

He led me through the thinning crowd of people to a dark blue Ford LTD with a whip antenna that was parked next to Bert's Harley-Davidson. God knows who would ride that motorcycle again, I thought, and though I had just met him that day and hadn't particularly liked him much, I still found myself tearing up some. I had a flash of regret—maybe I should have been nicer to him.

At the rear of the LTD, writing notes on a paper-cluttered metal

clipboard, was a woman about fifteen or so years older than me. She had brown hair in some sort of bob haircut that looked a decade or two out of date, and she was wearing black slacks, a white blouse, and a short brown leather jacket. She looked up at me and I spotted a thin white scar on the bottom of her chin.

"You're Jenny Wilson, right? The intern from the *Chronicle*?"

"Yeah," I said.

She held out her hand, which I shook. "Detective Diane Woods, Tyler police department. You were on the boat when Bert Comstock fell overboard, am I right?"

So far, two for two, but her face was set, and she didn't look like one for joking. So I nodded and said, "That's right."

"I need a few minutes to talk to you."

And I needed a few days to put this whole bloody day behind me, but I just wanted to get it over with, and I nodded again.

"Good. About what time did he fall off?"

"About ten A.M. It was after they had gotten their first load of the day. Jack was heading out to another fishing area when Bert . . . when Bert fell in."

She made a few notes and said "uh-huh," then asked, "And where were you when he fell in?"

"In the wheelhouse."

"And Jack?"

"He was in the captain's chair, steering the boat."

"Did you see Bert fall in?"

"No, I didn't."

She stared at me. "But you were in the wheelhouse."

"Yeah, but I was . . . but, I was tired. I had been on the boat since four A.M.; I had taken some antmotion-sickness medicine, and I got sleepy. There's a padded bench in the wheelhouse. That's where I stretched out."

"So you didn't see anything."

I bit my lip for a moment. "That's what I said. I didn't see anything."

"Did you hear anything?"

"Yeah, I did," I said. "There was a thump I heard from up forward. And then I heard Jack start yelling, and he went out to look for Bert, and I followed."

"And did you see anything in the water?"

"No, not a thing."

"Really? He wasn't wearing a life jacket?"

I rubbed my hands together. "They're fishermen . . . I think, I think it's a point of pride for them, that they don't wear life jackets. And Jack thought, well, he thought maybe he had run him over, that the propeller had struck him."

More scribbles on the clipboard. "I see . . . anything else you think I should know?"

I thought for a bit and said, "Blood."

"Blood?"

"Yeah, there was blood on the bow. Where he hit his head when he fell off."

"Thanks, that's good to know."

I yawned. "Look . . . I've had a hell of a day. All right if I head out?"

She went back to her clipboard. "Sure . . . oh, one more thing."

"Yeah?"

"Did you take any photos while you were out there?"

"Sure."

"And took notes, I'm sure."

I was quickly becoming more awake. I didn't like where this was going. "Of course I took notes. Lots of notes."

Her face was set. "I'm sorry. I'm going to need to look at your notes, and your photos. As part of the investigation."

I spoke without thinking. "No."

"Excuse me?"

I shook my head. "No. No way. You're not seeing my notes, or my photos. First Amendment and all that, Detective."

It seemed like the white scar on her chin was getting whiter. She said, "And this is a serious business, and I'm investigating an untimely death, and all that, Miss Intern. So I want your notes and your photos."

"You're not getting them."

"I could arrest you, you know, for interfering in a police investigation."

"Do what you have to do," I said, "because I'm going to do what I have to do."

She smiled a not-so-friendly smile that chilled me. "Your choice, then."

I guess so.

And you know what?

They really do say, "Watch your head," when they're putting you in a police cruiser, after they put those very heavy and very cold handcuffs on your wrists.

An hour later I was in a cell on the first floor of the Tyler police station, about a five-minute drive from the harbor. I had been put in the rear of a police cruiser and brought over, and through the entire booking process, they were quite polite, taking down my name and personal information, taking my fingerprints and a mug

shot. It seemed like a big giant joke until it came time for the strip search.

"The what?" I had asked.

"Strip search," I was told. "To make sure you don't have any contraband either on your body or in your body."

Well.

A bored police matron, about the age and size of my mother, came in and snapped on a pair of rubber gloves, and when she was done I was issued an orange jumpsuit.

I sat in a small cell with a bed made of thick pad, another small pad for a pillow, and two wool blankets. A stainless steel sink and toilet bowl was in one corner. No television, no newspapers, no nothing, for the cells here were just holding cells. The real jail was at the county jail, a few towns over, with the state prisons being reserved for the really tough stuff.

So when was I getting out? I asked and got a shrug from one of the cops. "It's Friday. We don't do exchanges over the weekend. So you're going to be our guest until you get bailed out."

"And when's that?"

Another shrug. "Two of the local bail bondsmen are up north, at some convention. There's one guy covering this part of the state. Might get here tomorrow. Or Sunday. Depends."

Depends, I thought. Sure. I hugged myself in the cold cell. I knew what they were doing, and they were doing it pretty well. They were trying to shake me up, make me scared, make me want to cooperate. A lot has been written about the romance of being a journalist or a writer and being placed in a jail cell for one's beliefs, but I didn't see any romance or glory. I was cold, tired, and hungry. Earlier, I had been promised my one phone call, and I had hesitated. My mom, down there in Massachusetts? She would freak and get me out eventually, but I wouldn't want to spend the next year or two debating why I did what I did. Mother is still upset about the dress I wore to the junior prom back in high school, and to this day she picks fights with me about that fashion disaster, so Mother was off the contact list.

A lawyer? Didn't know any lawyers, thank you very much. One of my professors at UNH . . . possible, but I didn't want to singlehandedly destroy or damage the intern program by the stand I was taking.

My editor, Rollie . . . um, no. After getting my butt out of jail, he would probably send my butt back to school, and with one destroyed internship under my belt, I would never have a chance to get another one.

Which left just one person. I called, got an answering machine, left a message, and was promptly taken back to my cell.

Where I waited.

Sometime a couple of hours and a lifetime later, a young cop came by, carrying a tray.

"Dinner," he said. "Hungry?"

"Yeah, I am," I said, getting off the bed. "What do you have?"

He said, "What I got is what you're getting."

He slid the tray under an opening through the bars. "When you're done, put the tray back out. You leave a mess . . . well, you won't like what breakfast is going to be."

I picked up the tray. Cold cheeseburger wrapped in wax paper, complete with mustard, ketchup, and onions. I hate onions, and mustard is only for hot dogs, but I managed to scrape the offending stuff off before chewing and swallowing it. Bag of chips. Lukewarm cup of cola. I finished what they gave me, washed my hands, and gently slid the neat tray back out into the hallway.

Now suddenly tired of it all, I stretched out on the hard foam mattress and pulled a wool blanket over me. It smelled of harsh detergent. I closed my eyes, but sleep just wouldn't come, so I thought again and again about the events of the day, what I had seen, what I had heard. Things . . . things were not right, and I spent most of the night thinking, again and again, and when I wasn't thinking, well, I felt sorry for myself and cried a couple of times.

Morning. And the only way I could tell it was morning was that the lights, dimmed during the night, came back on. Another young cop came in and said, "You've got a visitor. You want breakfast first or the visitor?"

"The visitor. Please. Breakfast can wait."

"Sure." He left and a minute later, Paula Quinn from the *Chronicle*, the woman who had warned me to stay away from her beat, walked in, carrying a folding chair. She opened the chair and sat down. She was wearing jeans, black sneakers, and a gray TYLER BEACH sweatshirt.

"Hi," I said.

She folded her hands around one of her knees. "You know, we get interns like you three times a year. Fall, spring, and summer. Three years ago, we had an intern who didn't drive and didn't want to get a driver's license. So she took a bicycle around to do all her stories. Last year, we had an intern who subsidized his income by selling marijuana to out-of-towners at the beach. So we're used to odd interns. But, Jenny, congratulations, you're the oddest."

I leaned into the bars, held onto them with my hand. "Look, the

detective, she wanted to look at my notes, my pictures, she wanted to—”

Paula raised her hand. “Oh *please*. What did you expect her to do? She’s investigating an untimely death, she’s looking to find out the truth of what happened out there, and she’s looking for help from you. And what did you do? Pull out your Journalism 101 copy of the First Amendment and wave it around.”

“And what else should I have done? Roll over? Cooperate?”

She leaned forward a bit in her chair. “And why the hell not? You stay with her, you let her glance through your notes, ask a few questions, and then flip through your digital pics. Bing, bang, boom, you’re done in under an hour, and you’ve put a fair number of chits in the favor bank.”

Now I felt tired and just a bit overwhelmed. “What . . . what kind of reporter are you anyway?”

“A damn good one,” she snapped back. “A good one at finding out the news and reporting the news. For God’s sake, Jenny, if I acted like you all the time, do you know what I’d get? A weekly press release from the police department, giving me the bare essentials of burglaries, car accidents, and other events. That’s it. And because I’m not like you, you know what I get?”

I just motioned with my hands, too tired to continue. She said, “What I get is good stories. Like last month. Detective Woods got a tip that a couple of young lads from Connecticut had set up an amateur pharmacy clinic in their motel room for the summer. Because I had favors in the chit bank, Diane let me go in on the raid. Got great photos, great story about what it looked like busting in on them, complete with descriptions of the room and the young morons. You know what the other newspapers got around here? A four-sentence press release announcing the arrest. That’s it.”

“Sounds like bribery to me,” I said.

A vigorous shake of the head. “No, it’s called being smart, it’s called knowing who you are and where you’re going. It’s called community reporting, that’s what it’s called. So, Jenny. It’s Saturday morning. You can wait until Monday to be bailed out and let this whole circus continue, so that Rollie knows, the entire town knows, hell, other newspapers know. Brave, crusading intern reporter.”

I wiped at my face. God, I needed a shower. “And my other option?”

“You tell me you want to see Detective Woods. She looks through your notes, through your digital pics. And then everything’s dismissed. No paper trail, no record, nothing. Free to go home.”

Home. My ratty little one-room apartment that seemed so cozy and homey right about then.

I wiped at my face again. So tired.

"Deal. Under one condition."

That made her smile. "Not sure if you're in any position to ask for a condition, but go ahead."

"This is my story, and I want access to Detective Woods. I want to be able to call her and talk to her, any time I want."

Paula stood up. "That's two conditions, but I think they're doable. Stay right here."

I went back and sat down on the hard mattress. "Not like I'm going anywhere now, right?"

Sunday morning. In my little apartment. Woke and stretched and I should have felt good, but I didn't. Yesterday, after getting out of the cell and retrieving my notes and digital camera from my car, I spent a few minutes with Detective Woods, answering her questions, and then that was that. Went home and showered and ate and went to bed, cried a bit, and slept through the night.

But still I thought of Friday. About that trip out.

I got dressed and drove the fifteen minutes to the Tyler police station, and surprise of surprises, when I asked the dispatcher for Detective Woods, I got in her office in just under a minute.

Maybe there was something to this whole chit business.

"Yes?" she asked, sitting behind her gunmetal gray desk piled high with manila folders. She looked tired.

On the way over, I had batted around what I was going to say, so I decided to get right to it.

"I think it was a scam, a setup."

"You do?"

"Yeah, I do," I said.

"Why?"

I said, "Because I don't think he fell over. I think the sound I heard, that thump, was the sound of the forward bulkhead door slamming shut. I think Bert smeared some of his blood on the bow of the boat—easy enough to use a knife out there—and then ducked in through the forward bulkhead. Hid there for the whole day. Doesn't make sense that right after hearing that noise, we didn't see him floating. Bodies can't possibly sink that fast, can they? Besides . . . Jack, he seemed upset. But upset to a point, like he was acting. So I think it was a scam, Diane."

"For what purpose?" she asked evenly.

"Insurance fraud. I bet as an employee of Jack's, Bert had insurance. Jack told me he had no family . . . and I bet he had a policy where Jack was the beneficiary."

She smiled and lifted a folder, opened it up. "Very good, Jenny. Very good. The fact is, Bert did have a policy, for one million dollars, and Jack was in fact his beneficiary. Very good."

I smiled back. Felt good. Felt like I wasn't screwing up.

Said feeling lasted about ten seconds.

Diane put the folder back on the desk. "A nice little theory, Jenny. Except Bert's body was recovered about two hours ago, by another fishing boat from Falconer. Injury to his head, initial cause of death: drowning."

So back home I went. Sunday early afternoon. Tomorrow morning I would have to write a story for Rollie about this whole disaster, and as I looked through my notes and my digital photos, I just couldn't do it. My little laptop sat patiently on my homemade desk—a plank of wood sitting on four plastic milk crates—and I just couldn't bear to touch the keyboard.

Even my notes seemed silly, like they had been written by a perky little girl who knew nothing about life or death. Every little detail written down, from the moment I arrived at that dock, to . . .

Every little detail.

I went back to my notes again. And then the digital photos.

"Damn," I whispered, and for the second time that day, I drove back to the Tyler police station, and this time I stayed for about an hour, until the good detective practically threw me out.

That Sunday night, I drove up to a small ranch house in Tyler, painted a light yellow, walked up to the front door, and rang the bell. On the side of the house was a collection of rope, anchors, old nets, and other bric-a-brac. I rang the bell again and a woman answered: Helen Houlihan, looking cautious, cigarette in hand, wearing a black turtleneck and jeans.

"Yes?" she asked, and I told her who I was and that I wanted to see her husband. In a minute or two I was in their living room, the television set now muted, and they sat on a couch and I sat in an easy chair that didn't feel particularly easy. There was a fake fireplace on one side of the room, the mantelpiece stuffed with family pictures.

I took a breath. "You heard that they found Bert's body?" I asked, feeling a bit constricted in my clothes.

"Yeah," Jack said, sitting slumped on the couch. "I heard that."

"Do you have any information about funeral arrangements?"

"Nope, I don't."

I had my reporter's notebook in my hand. "I . . . I'd like to get your reaction, if I can."

"My what?" Jack asked, a bit sharply.

"Your reaction. For the newspaper. About Bert's body being recovered."

He looked to Helen and she violently shook her head. "No," he said. "It's . . . it's been too much. We don't have anything to say."

I looked at my notebook with its blank page, and I said, "I guess, then, I should leave. Look, before I go, think I could bum a smoke?"

Again, the shared look, and then Helen went out to the kitchen and came back, tossed a pack of Winstons on the coffee table. I looked up and said, "Oh, thanks anyway. I find I don't like those . . . Jack, do you think I could bum some from you?"

He shook his head. "Sorry. I don't smoke. Wish I could convince her to give it up."

"Yeah," she muttered, sitting down. "You wish."

I got up and said, "Well . . . I guess I won't waste your time. Thanks."

More quiet nods from the both of them, and then I left.

And I drove right to the police station.

In Detective Woods's office, she stood there while I lifted up my blouse, so she could gently take off the microphone and wire. "Did you get it?" I asked.

"Oh yes, we got it all right."

I said, "Still not sure what it meant for you."

"It meant we have him on tape, denying he smokes. We have you, saying you smelled fresh tobacco smoke in his truck the morning you went out. Which means it's highly likely Mrs. Houlihan accompanied him that morning. A nice little bit of information. And we also have this."

She went to her desk, picked up two photo printouts, taken on the deck of the *Helen H.* this past Friday. Among the dozens and dozens of photos I had taken were two of the open toolbox in the aft section of the boat. In the first photo, the open toolbox contained a long, heavy wrench. In the second photo, taken after Bert went missing, the wrench was gone. Something cool seemed to tickle at the back of my throat. I had started out on this particular quest as a journalist; I wasn't sure what in hell I was ending up as.

"Nice catch on your part," she said, "noticing the missing wrench. And speaking of missing . . . Just so you know, a more thorough examination of Mr. Comstock's body showed abrasions

around his left shin. Like something had been tied there. Probably a length of rope and a weight of some sort."

I folded my arms, suppressed a shiver. "It was the wife, then. She was hidden up forward, and when Jack adjusted the engine speed, it was his signal to her to come out and whack Bert. Tie off an anchor line. Drop him and the wrench into the ocean. Go back into the boat. Sneak out when the people started climbing aboard after we docked. And her hubby made sure I took an antmotion-sickness pill beforehand, so I'd doze off."

Diane went to her desk. "No real evidence yet, but we'll break her. Get here in here, talk to her long enough, she'll flip. I don't care how much she loves her man, if it's a choice between life in prison or flipping, she'll testify against him."

"Nice," I said, my voice low.

"Oh yeah, a real nice pair." Diane looked up and smiled at me, the first real genuine smile the detective had ever given me. "It's Sunday night. I guess you're going to write one hell of a story tomorrow."

I rubbed at my bare arms. "I . . . I don't know. I mean, I know I will . . . and if you told me a week ago, that I'd be doing a story about a homicide, I would have thought I had won the lottery. But now, it seems . . . silly."

Diane said, her voice softer, "Rethinking a career in journalism?"
"Rethinking a lot of things."

Another smile. "Well, if you decide to go elsewhere, you might find a home here."

I stopped rubbing my arms. "As a cop?"

"Sure. We're hiring part-time officers for the rest of the summer season, and women always get a good look because the department is short of them. You know how to talk to people, you know how to ask questions, and you've got a sharp mind. Not a bad combination."

I stood for a moment, not saying anything, and Diane said, "Well?"

"I guess . . . I guess being outside of a jail cell, looking in, is better than being in, looking out."

She laughed. "Always is. Think about it. Give me a ring next week, I can set you up."

"All right, I will," I said, and there was something inside of me, right then and there, that made me know that my journalism professors would be mighty disappointed in me next week, and I found I didn't care that much.

The power of a single story, I guess. And what do you know, I had ended up with one, after all. 🐦

UNSOLVED

LOGIC PUZZLE BY ROBERT V. KESLING



Maurice Monteaux was the finest head chef in all New York City. Otherwise, Le Bon Vivant restaurant would not have tolerated his haughty, often sadistic outbursts. The kitchen staff operated in constant dread of his unreasonable demands and caustic criticism. As a result of his latest tirade, the dessert chef had quit on the spot. Under no circumstances would he return.

Hence, Le Bon Vivant advertised nationwide for a dessert chef to replace him. Many applied, and the field was finally narrowed to seven women, each from a different state. They included three brunettes, two blondes, and two redheads. Each was given free rein of the restaurant's kitchen facilities to prepare her best entry. The desserts were numbered one through seven and submitted to M. Monteaux for his rating and approval.

1. No two consecutively numbered entries were prepared by contestants with the same hair color.
2. Ms. Bakay (whose entry was not number 4) did not prepare the brownies; Ms. Carson did not bake the chiffon cake; Ms. Elgar did not bake the eclairs; and Ms. Gordi did not make the German chocolate cake.
3. Janice (whose entry was not number 4), the lady from Rhode Island (whose entry was not number 5), and the baker of the chiffon cake (who was not from Ohio) had last names of Anson, Bakay, and Carson (in some order). They included two blondes and one redhead.
4. The odd-numbered entries included those of Ms. Gordi (who was not from Utah), Helene, the lady from South Carolina, and the maker of the eclairs. Nadine had an even-numbered entry.

5. Ms. Folger, the contestant from Tennessee, and the one who made devil's food cake are all brunette. Their first names are Laura, Maria (whose entry was not number 1), and Nadine (who did not enter the brownies).
6. Kathy (who isn't Ms. Gordi), the baker of the German chocolate cake, and the lady whose entry was number 6 do *not* include Ms. Carson. They are (in some order) from Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Virginia. They include two blondes and one brunette.
7. The apple strudel, brownies, and flan were prepared by Ms. Dawes (who isn't Idella), the lady from Pennsylvania (who isn't Kathy), and the contestant whose entry was number 3.
8. Neither the apple strudel nor the brownies were made by a red-haired contestant.

Just before M. Monteaux sampled the last two entries, he suddenly doubled in pain, gasped, and collapsed. Medical help was promptly summoned, but he was DOA at the hospital.

Obviously, the man had been poisoned. Detectives questioned the contestants without results. Then analysis by the medical examiner proved that the poison had been in the dessert prepared by Monteaux's red-haired ex-wife, who had entered the contest for the express purpose of revenge on her sadistic former husband.

Who poisoned the cantankerous, cruel, caustically critical head chef? In what dessert?

The solution will appear in next month's issue.

THE LENGTH OF A STRAW

R. T. LAWTON

My reception at the hunting camp just before dusk was not what I had expected. And if I had somehow been warned in advance that the rising of the next morning's sun would have me staring up into the dark muzzle of a rifle, I would have chosen to remain safely back in the Cossack village. But since these fore-sights are seldom granted to man, I soon found that my staying behind would surely have resulted in *two* unmarked graves beneath the lonely sand and grass of the wide-reaching steppes. For in this violent land it is a common saying among the hill tribes that a man's life is oftentimes so short it can be measured by the length of a single straw.

My long afternoon ride in the sunwarmth of early spring had been pleasant enough starting from the guard tower along the ice-clogged Terek River. Then the path led through a dense strip of forest and out across rolling high-grass plains. Here, pale drifts of dirt-encrusted snow still remained in small gullies and on shaded sides of hills taller than their neighbors. On slopes exposed to the south, scattered clumps of new green sprouts barely poked up through damp soil where sunlight had lingered longer upon the earth.

Only toward evening did a light wind rise up, bringing a blue chill to my fingertips and the outer edges of my ears, as the cooling sun descended until it hung barely a hand's breadth above the horizon. Then as I topped the next low rise, the rough-hewn hut that Daddy Eroshka used for his hunting parties came into sight. Above its slanted roof, a thin column of white smoke from the old Cossack's tiled stove trailed upward to disappear into the gathering gray clouds.

Just outside of the beaten-down yard, I slid stiffly down the side of my saddle, hobbled my horse to graze, and was still a couple of strides from the hut when its only door banged open. Daddy Eroshka, in his usual sheepskin coat and winter hat, peered cautiously out over my shoulder toward the long shadows gradually

creeping across the rolling land. Quickly, he clutched me by the forearm and yanked me inside. The door slammed shut behind.

In the smoky dim light of the cabin's interior, the old white-bearded Cossack threw one bearlike arm around my waist and the other across my shoulder. He hugged me briefly to his broad chest, pounding his large, calloused palms on my back, before standing me onto my feet again and inquiring in a flat voice, "Tell me, *kunak*, did you see anything out there?"

I tried to read the deep lines in his face for expectations on my answer, but his expression gave nothing away.

"Only a wild boar crashing through the frozen reeds down by the river at noon, some pheasants scratching for seeds at the edge of the forest much later, and a hungry buzzard circling high over the steppes just before I rode into view of your hut," was my reply.

"No animals of the two-legged variety?"

"Not for the last several *verst*s along my journey."

"Then you are a lucky man, Armenian. When we saw you ride up, we thought maybe some of our lads from the river cordon had heard our troubles and come to help us."

Quickly, I glanced around inside the one-room shanty used as a night shelter on those occasions when sunlight grew short and Eroshka's hunting group was still far afield from the village. The hut smelled of burning wood, damp wool, leather harness, pipe tobacco, and old earth. Lingering above the other aromas came the faint scent of pungent tea from a samovar on the brick and tile stove.

To my right stood Garaska, a graybeard Cossack I had oft paid small bribes in the past to ensure my trading party's safe crossing south into the Wild Country of the hill tribes. On this night, Garaska stayed carefully to one side of a small window and its propped-open shutter while his musket leaned near at hand against the wall. I considered this man as one of my friends among the border guards, yet this night he spoke no word of greeting. He kept staring anxiously out at clumps of dead grass stalks swaying in the evening wind, out toward the Terek River and far distant snow-capped peaks of the Caucasus Mountains. Except for a short nod in my direction, Garaska barely acknowledged my entrance.

To the rear of the hunting hut, three soldiers wearing uniforms of the tsar's army stared at us from around a rickety wood table where a smoke-blackened lantern hanging from the crude ceiling supplied dim light to the back of the room. Two of these Russians held playing cards but seemed more interested in my arrival. The third soldier appeared to have already thrown in his hand. He paused with his unlit clay pipe halfway to his mouth.

"All looks fairly peaceful to me," I said in a low voice to the old

whitebeard. "What troubles do you have here?"

"Abreks," Daddy muttered.

"Chechens from the Wild Country?"

The old Cossack nodded.

"Some of their shave-headed braves must've crossed over to go raiding north of the Terek River while the ice was still strong. The sudden thaw trapped them on our side of the river, unless they wanted to make a cold swim for it or found some other way of crossing. This morning we surprised each other out there on the steppes. They fired a few musket balls at us, but we retreated, holed up here, and soon drove them back. Since then it's been a waiting game until you showed up."

"But when I left your guard tower at the river cordon several hours ago," I replied "no one there heard the rattle of gunfire. All was peaceful. And I saw no one in the tall grass outside your door just now."

"Bah," replied the old Cossack. "It's said that three of those Sons of Muhammad can hide behind a single blade of grass. A true Old Believer like me has to cross himself twice in the old way before pulling the trigger if he hopes to kill even one of them devils in hiding."

I turned for the door, but Daddy Eroshka caught my upper arm in a firm grasp.

"Where are you going?"

"My horse, I left him to graze."

"You'll not see him again," boomed Garaska from beside the window. "They've already taken ours. Those Abreks are a race of thieves. Can't keep their hands off anything left lying around."

"Besides," said Eroshka, "as you can see, there's no room for your horse in here. Don't worry my friend, we'll steal you another horse back from them after the river fully thaws. Maybe even a better mount than the one you rode here."

In the meticulous accounts I kept of my trading ventures in this dangerous land, such a swap would balance my sums. But I wasn't sure I wanted to be trading my Turkic goods south of the Terek in the Wild Country a couple of months from now and have one of my Chechen customers recognize the replacement horse I would then be riding as a horse he had previously owned. For now, I said nothing. I had always found it was better to deal with each problem in its own time.

"This is sooner than we usually expect those brigands," continued the old Cossack in his plodding manner. "But then spring came early this year. I thought we'd have two more weeks of peace and quiet until the ice is gone and it's safe to cross, but here those devils are, raiding on our side of the river already."

As a neutral party and a merchant of much-desired silver jewelry and items of fine silk, I could generally travel on either side of the border and receive a warm welcome. But with three Russian soldiers now fortified up here in Daddy Eroshka's hut, this was no time to voice that claim. These Russians, with the expansion of their Muscovy Empire, were a different breed from my easygoing Cossacks. With Russians you were expected to choose a side and stay there, as a friend to them and as an enemy to their enemies.

The tallest Muscovite, with the markings of a colonel of the line on his army uniform and with a revolver in his right hand, stood up from behind their rickety table at the rear of the hut. I noticed most of the silver coins from their card game seemed to be stacked on his side of the table.

"Eroshka, who comes to visit us?"

Daddy turned his head toward the commanding voice.

"It is the man we call the Armenian, a *kunak*—a comrade—of mine. He often brings me a bottle or two of *chikhir*—wine—from the village."

"Good," replied the colonel, "we can use a drink to pass the time."

The old Cossack turned his gaze back to me, lowered his voice, and grinned for the first time since I had arrived.

"I heard the clink of glass in your knapsack when I lifted you up to greet you. So what have you brought us?"

Opening the top of my knapsack, I displayed three bottles of local wine.

Eroshka quickly pushed one of them farther down into the knapsack and out of sight. He winked at me. Then with the two remaining bottles, one in each hand, he advanced toward the table of Russians.

"Your Excellency, we have two bottles of *chikhir* from the village to share amongst the six of us. One for you three good soldiers, and one for the other three of us."

"Get your drinking cups," replied the colonel. "I will do the pouring."

Daddy Eroshka ducked his head and muttered just loud enough for me to hear. "It's no less than what I expected. Ever since we lost the rebellion, a Cossack gets short shrift when his Russian masters dispense the wealth."

As I watched how events proceeded, I had to admit the old Cossack was right in what he'd said. Our first bottle and part of the second went to the Russians. As ranking officer, the colonel portioned the most to himself. On his right, Cadet Aleksei, who claimed family connections to Tsar Nicholas in Moscow, also received a large portion. Even their army orderly, Vassili, on the colonel's left, ended

up with a full cup. Any leftovers were ours to share.

"Now we play cards again," roared the colonel.

"Not me," replied Vassili. "I've lost all my pay. There is no more to be had. I'm going to sleep." He found a corner on the floor next to the brick oven decorated with colorful tiles in the Cossack style. Covering himself with his army greatcoat, he settled in.

"Aleksei?" inquired the colonel.

The cadet snorted. "You've cleaned me out."

"I'll loan you rubles on credit until your allowance comes from your estates next month."

"Very well, your luck can't hold forever."

And the two of them sat down to play at cards again.

Aleksei suddenly paused in counting his pile of newly borrowed coins. "What about the Abreks?" he asked, glancing toward the small open window.

The colonel looked up from shuffling cards.

"Eroshka," he commanded, "You, Garaska, and the Armenian keep watch during the night. We'll decide what to do about the Chechens at daybreak."

"Of course, your Honor," said the old Cossack. He motioned to Garaska.

Garaska, musket in hand, strode over from the window. The three of us huddled together in whispers so as not to disturb the Russians and thus draw attention to ourselves. By now, it was full dark out on the steppes, except for a few pale streaks of light from the rising half moon as it fought its way through gaps in black drifting clouds. In the rear of the hut, the soldier's one hanging lantern gave off only a faint glow, barely enough to distinguish one card from another. Still, the light was sufficient to silhouette the head of any watcher at the window, if one were unwise enough to show much of himself as a target within that small wooden frame.

"Armenian," said Daddy Eroshka as he opened my knapsack, "you take the first watch. It is the easiest of the night. I'll have the second watch, and Garaska can take over until dawn."

I nodded my agreement and went unarmed to the far side of the open window.

My two Cossack friends huddled in a corner on the other side of the door and made themselves comfortable. I heard the soft clink of glass on metal and knew they'd started in on the third bottle, the one Daddy Eroshka had pushed back into my knapsack in order to withhold some tribute from the Russians.

Time passed slowly at the window. Above the steppes, the half moon floated higher, casting dim silver light on swaying grass tops. Shadows moved with the grass. From a distance came sharp

squeals of an unlucky rabbit caught by a quick four-footed predator; closer at hand sounded cries of night birds on the wing. Out there were the hunter and the hunted. To my mind, the inside of this rude hut seemed a very suitable place for me to spend the night, safe in the company of good friends and other armed men.

At the front corner of the hut, whispers drifted by from the two old Cossacks reliving their youthful days of past glory. Out of the hut's rear came muted exclamations of gloating intermingled with curses of displeasure and the clink of silver as coins changed hands. The two Russians played on into the hours. Eventually, the lantern burned out and the card players retired to makeshift beds; the cadet to a pile of cut grass on the dirt floor and the colonel to the warm, flat bench above the tiled oven along the side wall.

After a few hours, Daddy Eroshka relieved me at the window. With a yawn of thanks, I soon stretched myself out in front of the door and fell fast asleep. Considering the circumstances, my dreams were fairly untroubled.

I awoke to morning streaks of sunlight pouring onto my face through thin cracks in the wooden door, and an insistent Russian boot nudging my ribs.

"Get up, thief."

My eyes widened to see the muzzle of the orderly's rifle pointed directly between my eyes. I sat up, my back against the door, and my hands raised to shoulder level. To my left, Daddy Eroshka, the old whitebeard, sat with his giant scarred hands placed flat on top of his short-cropped head. He stared at the cadet, who covered him with a revolver. On my right, Garaska slumped peaceably against the wall beside the open window. The third bottle lay empty on the floor at Garaska's feet, and he snored as if he had no fear of Judgment Day. I now noticed his musket had been removed far from his reach.

"A fine lot we have here," the colonel said in a soft voice. "Sleeping on duty."

"A shooting offense," crowed Cadet Aleksei.

"Not yet," replied the colonel. "First we see who stole my money while we slept. Search them."

Very carefully, Aleksei went through all of Daddy Eroshka's clothing, then searched the old Cossack's other meager belongings.

"Nothing on this thief," he said, before stepping back and covering Eroshka again.

The colonel gestured at me.

Vassili handed his rifle to the colonel. At the orderly's urging, I stood and was searched from head to boot. Finding my purse tied to my belt, the orderly tossed the leather pouch to the colonel who

quickly counted its Russian and Turkic coins.

"Not as much as I lost, but it will do for a beginning."

"Those are mine from many months of trading," I exclaimed.

"So you say, Armenian, so you say. Tell me who the thief is and you may have these back."

"I know nothing of any thief. I stood my watch as you requested and then slept through the rest of the night."

"Too bad for you, Armenian."

"That leaves the old graybeard," blurted the cadet. "He's the only one left."

After much prodding from a rifle barrel, Garaska was roused from his slumber. He rolled his eyes in my direction, but there was naught for me to say. The colonel commanded us to silence except to answer their questions.

"On your feet, thief," taunted the orderly.

Garaska slowly pushed his way up and was searched.

"Bah," exclaimed Vassili, "nothing on him either."

Cadet Aleksei drew a Circassian dagger from the sheath at his own waist.

"Give me an hour with each of them and they'll quickly tell us where your stolen money is hidden."

Being a merchant rather than a warrior, I had never dealt well with pain. Instead I had always relied much on the quickness of my brain to keep me from these troubling types of situations, even if my quickness rushed me to a hasty judgment or possibly made me appear foolish to others. Brain or pain? I knew my choice, and therefore addressed the colonel directly.

"I believe I can solve your problem."

The colonel fixed his eyes on me.

"See," said the cadet, "now we come to it. They admit taking your money while we slept."

The colonel motioned for me to speak further.

"You three gentlemen in service to Nicholas, tsar of all the Russias, consider yourselves to be men of honor, is this not so?"

The colonel barely nodded.

"And these two Cossacks, along with myself, also consider ourselves to be honorable men, in our own way."

"Armenian, where are you going with this?" muttered Eroshka.

"Therefore," I continued before any of the Russians could interrupt, "we can agree on one common ground. Everyone here is honest, except for the thief among us."

"Except for the thief," echoed the colonel.

"It is good we agree," I replied, "because this truth-finding method I now propose works only with men of honor such as yourselves."

Garaska stared at me with wide-open eyes.

Daddy Eroshka crossed his arms over his chest, resigned to whatever the fates held.

Vassili looked to the colonel.

"It's a trick," muttered Cadet Aleksei.

The colonel kept his gaze fixed on me, waiting.

"In the Turkic lands to the south," I said, "at the sultan's court, I learned a way that works with all honest men, regardless of their religion. Merely lend me a knife to make two little cuts—" I held up the first two fingers on my left hand to emphasize such a small number. "—and I'll quickly demonstrate how it works."

In the ensuing silence, I mentally counted from one to forty-six before the colonel made up his mind to speak. I could tell he was curious, but then he also had the upper hand and had nothing to lose if my little amusement soon fell short.

"Vassili, give him that small knife you use to clean the horses' hooves."

"The Armenian is one of them," protested Aleksei, "we can't give them a weapon to use against us."

"In the coming Summer Campaign against the Chechens," replied the colonel in a dry voice, "we face sabers and musket balls on the field of battle. Right now you have a firearm in your hand, and you're telling me you are afraid of someone holding a blade no longer than your little finger? How will your family explain this fear of yours to the tsar's court in Moscow?"

Cadet Aleksei tightened his jaw and said nothing more.

The colonel inclined his head in my direction. Vassili reached into the pocket of his army greatcoat and tossed me a small knife.

I motioned the cadet to take a few steps backward before I bent over to pick up several stalks of dried grass from the floor near Daddy Eroshka's boots, grass stalks had clung to the cadet's coat from his bed on the floor and had only recently been dislodged during his search of the old Cossack. Selecting six long pieces of this grass, I placed them against the wooden door frame and cut the stalks evenly across the bottom. Then interposing my body between the door frame and everyone else's sight, I reversed the grass stalks and made another cut. Turning around, I tossed the short knife to the earth at the orderly's feet.

"This finding of truth is simplistic in its approach." I spoke in a serious tone and made sure to look each of the other five directly in the eyes. "Whoever draws the longest straw is the thief, and I will prove it to your satisfaction."

Fanning the six straws out evenly between thumb and forefinger of my closed left hand, I offered the cut stems to the colonel. One

corner of his mouth curled in a brief sardonic smile.

"Your Excellency has the honor of first draw," I stated.

Without hesitation, the colonel of the Line plucked a straw with his left hand. With his right, he drew his army revolver and let it hang at the side of his pants leg. He stepped back.

Next, the cadet. Aleksei studied the five remaining straws, reached for one, then withdrew his hand. Eventually, he too picked a straw. He turned his back and walked off two paces before rounding to cover us with his revolver again.

Vassili's hand hovered over the last four straws. Undecided, he touched one, then the other before finally selecting one. He too stepped back and held his rifle on us.

For his part, Daddy Eroshka reached blindly over and took a straw without looking to see which one he'd drawn.

Two left. One for me and one for the old graybeard.

Garaska locked eyes on me as if I could tell him which one to pick. In great agitation he blew out his breath. In the end, he drew and concealed the cut stalk in his large palm.

I had no choice in the matter. The remaining straw, good or bad, was mine. Like Eroshka, I didn't bother to consider its length. Instead, I carefully maneuvered the cut grass stem so it was now positioned in my left hand between the tip of my thumb and the tip of my first forefinger.

The colonel gave me a skeptical look.

I held my left hand out in front of me.

"Now hold your straws up next to mine."

Five hands came forward.

We all looked at the length of grass each of the other men had drawn. Five stalks were the same length. One was shorter.

"I thought," said the cadet, "that the *long* straw was supposed to be the thief, but there are five long ones here."

"My apologies for any small misdirection," was my reply, "but under the present circumstances, it became a matter of necessity. Here in this room, all claimed to be honorable men, so I cut all six straws to the same length. Only a dishonorable man, such as our thief, would deliberately shorten the length of his own straw to ensure that he did not end up with the long one."

The cadet's hand with the short straw began to tremble.

"If you search him and his belongings, Colonel, I believe you will find your missing money."

The colonel quickly relieved the cadet of his weapon.

"Vassili, I will watch these four. You check Aleksei's belongings."

Vassili stepped slowly back with his rifle still pointed at us, then turned and walked quickly to the pile of cut grass on the dirt floor.

With a last look in our direction, he leaned his rifle against the oven and knelt by the cadet's knapsack. Holding the knapsack upside down, he dumped the contents onto the dirt and pawed his way through each item. Nothing. Then he ran his fingers through the pile of cut grass.

I saw the orderly's hands come up with a small leather sack. He twisted his head far enough around to lock eyes with me. "How did you . . . ?"

"What have you found?" demanded the colonel.

Vassili clutched his rifle in one hand and returned with the newly discovered leather pouch in the other. The sound of coins jingling inside the pouch with his every step played a symphony to my ears. But then being a trader of goods, money spoke to me in a way that transcended all other languages. And this time, it also spoke to me of my freedom from a painful death.

It was hard for me to read the colonel's face. He glanced from the quantity of coins, which he knew as his own, to the nervous cadet before him.

No one moved and no one spoke for several minutes. And I for one had no wish to intrude on the colonel's thoughts at this moment. In time, he tossed my small bag of coins back to me, then holstered his revolver, placed his arm around the cadet's shoulders, and walked him to the far corner of the hut. They engaged in low whispers.

Daddy Eroshka and Garaska immediately assailed me from both sides with questions and statements, but even though I heard them and made replies, I kept my eyes on the pair of Russian officers in the far corner.

Daddy Eroshka crossed himself twice.

"What kind of sorcery was this, Armenian?"

"No magic, my friend, just logic and human nature."

"In that case, *kunak*, it is good for us you learned this method at the Sultan's court to the south. Otherwise, I would soon be explaining 'my little sins' to Saint Peter."

I risked a momentary glance at Eroshka's face. "The part about the Sultan's court was another of my misdirections. In truth, I invented this so-called method here this morning as a possible solution to our philosophical problem. If it didn't work, we were all dead anyway."

"Remind me not to gamble with you," Eroshka muttered.

In my other ear, Garaska continued murmuring.

"Truth be known, I almost broke my own straw to make it shorter, but you spoke often of us being honorable men. And even though I may take a few bribes at the river crossing, that hurts no one. And yes, I've stolen a few horses from the Chechens and the

Ingush and the Nogai, but that is just the game we play among ourselves to see who is the best of men. In my heart, as all Cossacks know, I am an honorable man. Isn't that so?"

While Eroshka and Garaska vouched for each other's honesty, I listened to bits of conversation from the pair in the corner. As best I could determine, the colonel was subtly persuading Cadet Aleksei that it was in his best interests to write glowing letters of commendation about the colonel's feats in the Summer Campaign they had yet to fight. The colonel would then hold these letters, and at the appropriate time, of course, they would be posted to the cadet's relatives in Moscow. Relatives close to the tsar.

Eventually, I felt Eroshka tugging on my coat sleeve as other thoughts began to bother him.

"Explain something to me, Armenian. When the colonel believed we had stolen his money, he was ready to shoot us and plant our dead bodies in silent graves beneath the steppes, but when it turns out Cadet Aleksei stole the money, then this same colonel wraps his arms around the cadet as if they were old drinking comrades. Where is the justice?"

"Justice is coming, my friend, it will merely take a little while to get here. This colonel is no fool. He knows he cannot hold this theft over the cadet's head forever. Given enough time, the cadet will become emboldened and would soon write other letters, letters critical of the colonel so as to discredit him should the colonel later decide to expose the cadet and the theft."

"What will the colonel do then?" inquired Garaska. "He will lose all advantage."

"It will never go that far," I replied.

"What do you mean?" asked Eroshka.

In a low voice I gave my answer.

"I suspect Cadet Aleksei will tragically perish at the hands of the Abreks during their Summer Campaign. Until that time, the colonel will keep Aleksei very close at hand."

After a few moments, a smile of enlightenment slowly lit up Daddy Eroshka's face.

"Ah, a truly heroic death for the colonel to tell Cadet Aleksei's relatives back at the Muscovy court."

I nodded.

This colonel of the Line was a survivor, both in the battlefield and in the political machinations of the Russian court. I would do well to study him and learn.

But then I had caught him glancing in my direction a couple of times from where they stood in the corner, as if he were now also taking my measure. I almost grinned. ♣

BOOKED & PRINTED

ROBERT C. HAHN

Forensics is still one of the hottest areas of the mystery and suspense genres, inspiring both fiction and nonfiction. One of the defining works of the category was Patricia Cornwell's 1990 debut novel *Postmortem*. Cornwell's latest novel, **BOOK OF THE DEAD** (Putnam, \$26.95), is her fifteenth to feature Dr. Kay Scarpetta, formerly the Virginia chief medical examiner, who is now in private practice as a consultant, and it has all the elements fans have come to expect and to love: the hands-on forensic work coupled with the latest in high-tech equipment far beyond the reach of ordinary police departments or even the best equipped big city departments; and the return of core characters who flesh out the series, her secretary Rose, investigator Pete Marino, her forensic psychologist boyfriend Benton Wesley, her computer-geek niece Lucy Farinelli, and the despicable Dr. Marilyn Self. And there is the unflappable Scarpetta wearing a mantle of calculating rationality to protect her against her own emotions.

Cornwell wastes little time thrusting the reader into the story with a gripping description of a serial killer at work, then pulling back to view Scarpetta, Wesley, and top Italian officials as they consider the nude, mutilated corpse of American tennis phenom Drew Martin, left carefully arranged in the heart of Rome's historic district.

The killer is quickly nicknamed the Sandman—he is cautious and scrupulously careful to leave almost nothing in the way of clues, nothing, that is, but sand with unusual traces of gunshot residue.

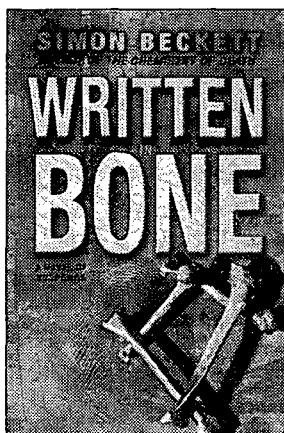
The Sandman may be the one who inflicts pain and death, but Dr. Marilyn Self, TV host, pop psychiatrist, and Scarpetta-hater, is a malignant force who is perhaps even worse than the killer. Dr. Self is kind of like a spider that enjoys watching the struggles of whatever gets caught in her web. That Dr. Self is embraced and lionized by the viewing public would be laughable without the real life examples already on the airwaves.

As the victims pile up—not in Rome but much closer to Scarpetta's own home in Charleston, South Carolina—Scarpetta

will need all of her skills and inner resources to crack the scant minute clues and unravel the twisted identity of the killer.

Cornwell skirts close to the edge in this novel, which offers a soap opera's worth of angst and melodrama. Scarpetta and Wesley struggle in their relationship, and Marino fights his personal demons and manipulation by Scarpetta's enemies; Rose faces her own crisis, and Lucy displays a dazzling combination of technological genius and reckless daring.

Following his debut in 2006 with *The Chemistry of Death*, U.K. author Simon Beckett, in *Written in Bone* (Delacorte, \$24), takes a very different but very effective approach to the forensic investigation: His protagonist must work with rudimentary at best



equipment. Dr. David Hunter, a London general practitioner turned forensic anthropologist, is on his way to the Glasgow airport to return home when he gets a call from Detective Superintendent Graham Wallace asking him to check out a body found in the remote island of Runa in the Outer Hebrides, off the coast of northern Scotland.

Hunter's laboratory consists of just what he can carry in an aluminum case; he certainly won't find elaborate equipment of any kind on the little village that is Runa. What he does find, inside a rustic cottage far from the village, is a body reduced to a pile of ash and bone—but nothing else in the room damaged by the fire. And for an added macabre touch, there are two unburned feet and one unburned hand protruding from the ashes.

Although Hunter's initial reaction is to call for an SOC (scene of crime) team, ferocious weather sets in that virtually cuts off the little island and its inhabitants from outside contact.

After that it's Hunter, the elements, and a beautifully drawn cast of islanders: the retired and reclusive Detective Inspector Andrew Brody who found the body; the young, enthusiastic Constable Duncan McKinney; the dour Sergeant Fraser; innkeeper Ellen McLeod and her daughter; and the village's benefactors, Michael and Grace Strachan. Also present is Maggie Cassidy, an aspiring journalist from nearby Stornoway who's visiting her grandmother on Runa.

Hunter is no detective, but as he pursues answers to how the unidentified victim came to her end, it becomes obvious that the

killer is still on the island and determined to erase whatever clues might remain.

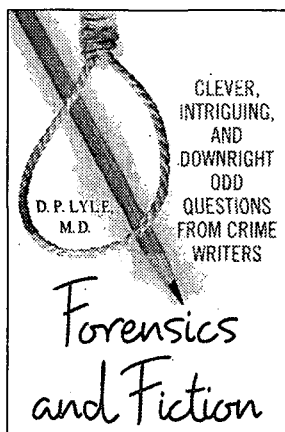
Rich in atmosphere and ripe with suspense, Beckett leads his hero and the reader on a twisting journey where the killer is as treacherous as the rocky terrain and the stormy weather.

Dr. D. P. Lyle is a consulting forensic specialist whose entertaining **FORENSICS AND FICTION** (St. Martin's Press, \$23.95) carries both an intriguing subtitle and two warnings. The subtitle is "Clever, Intriguing, and Downright Odd Questions From Crime Writers." The warnings: It is not to be used for diagnosis or real-life behavior. This book is not to be used as a manual for any criminal activity or to bring harm to anyone.

Dr. Lyle, an Orange County cardiologist, sifted through more than a thousand queries that cover the gamut from traumatic injuries of all sorts, to poisons and drugs, crime scenes and police, coroners, and autopsies and oddities. Not all of those who queried Dr. Lyle were willing to share their names, but among those who did are an impressive number of respected authors: Jan Burke, Gar Anthony Haywood, Kate Atkinson, Rochelle Krich, and Carolyn Hart.

In many cases, the questioner is seeking to establish the state of medical knowledge and treatment in a particular time or locale. In others they need to know what kind of an injury or wound could produce the particular results they desire. And sometimes, they need to know the unknowable. Among the amusing questions in the section on "Odds and Ends—Mostly Odds" are: Could the ME determine that my character had been eaten by a werewolf? Do zombie killers leave behind forensic evidence? Can my character die from an imagined disease?

The questions may be silly or strange or straightforward, but Lyle's answers are factual and his suggestions practical. The workings of the minds of mystery writers may well be adequately mysterious, devious, and diabolical, but D. P. Lyle's compendium is a welcome aid to the imagination.



ALL POINTS BULLETIN: Detroit P.I. Ben Perkins makes his long awaited return to novel-length adventures in his tenth starring role from author Rob Kantner, in **FINAL FLING** (Hard Woods Press).

THE KILLING FARM

DOUG ALLYN

The great plains buffalo was plodding in a stolid circle inside the corral, horseflies humming above his massive head, mud and dust matted in the curly fur of his coat. Six feet tall at the hump, eighteen hundred pounds of muscle and bone, the bull was shifting course slightly when he bumped against the corral posts, but otherwise he kept to his path, head down, ignoring the woman in khaki coveralls and work boots who was keeping pace with him, step by step, just outside the corral fence.

"What's wrong with him, doc?" Vic Russo asked, as the bull and the woman marched past him for the third time. The squat game farm owner was dressed for a safari in khaki shirt and shorts and high-topped, snake-proof boots. A thin cigar smoldered in the corner of his mouth.

"He's dying, Mr. Russo," Dr. Frankie McCrae said, kneeling to observe the buff's gait as he plodded on.

"You gotta be kidding," Russo snorted, examining the end of his cigar. "Looks healthy to me. That bull could go ten rounds with a Sherman tank."

Frankie couldn't argue the point. The bull did appear to be in prime shape. Silky chocolate coat, curved black horns gleaming like polished ebony in the afternoon sun. A magnificent beast, fierce and fearless. And yet . . .

She glanced around the grounds, trying to collect her thoughts. A gorgeous spring day, the sun sailing high in a cloudless sky. The Buffalo Country Game Preserve looked like a Frontier World theme park transported from Disneyland to the woodlands of northern Michigan. Three stories tall and half a block long, the main house was a soaring fortress built of gigantic pine logs, a *Gone with the Wind* front porch topped by a widow's walk. All it lacked were brass cannons on the parapets.

Looked a century old, except for long row of luxury SUVs parked beside the building. Top of the line Navigators, Escalades, even a Humvee stretch limo.

"Well?" Vic Russo prompted impatiently.

"Terminal circling is a bovine's final survival instinct," Frankie explained, watching the buffalo. "In the wild, animals that fall are torn to pieces by predators. As long as they keep moving, they're still alive, even when they don't know it anymore. He'll march till he drops. I noticed his water trough is full, has he tried to drink at all?"

"Mitch?" Russo called to his teenaged nephew. "Did that buff drink any water?"

"Nah," the kid spat. Dressed in camouflage fatigues, shades and a headband, toting an AK-47 assault rifle, Mitch looked more like a Sandinista guerilla than a hunting guide. "What you see is what you got."

"How long has he been like this?" Frankie asked.

"He wandered out of the woods into the compound yesterday," Mitch said. "He was acting weird—"

"Define weird," she interrupted.

"Like he is now," the kid said, annoyed. "Shuffling along, not paying attention to nothing. He jumped from the gunfire when I chased him into the corral—"

"Gunfire?" Frankie echoed, arching an eyebrow.

"I fired a few rounds near his feet to scare him into the pen," Mitch grinned, "made him dance a little."

"Trouble was, we already had a yearling bull in there," Vic added. "He charged the big guy, butted him, ripped open that gash in his side." Russo pointed a blunt forefinger at a flyblown wound at the rear of the buff's rib cage, matted with dried blood and filth. "Yearling must've been crazy. This buff outweighs him by a thousand pounds—"

"Did the larger bull fight back or react at all?" Frankie asked.

"Nah. Grunted when he got hooked, but otherwise he just kept marching along like he is now."

"They cull their own sick," Frankie mused. "The young bull sensed this big fella had a problem, tried to drive him away from the herd."

"Jesus," Vic scowled. "You don't think he's got brucellosis?"

"Not likely. He's too healthy. We wouldn't see behavior like this until the final stages. How long have you had him?"

"I don't know. Sevier! Get out here!"

And in that instant, the whole world turned upside down for Frankie. Shifted into a weird slow motion as Luke Sevier came stalking out of the barn, shirtless, carrying a pitchfork, wisps of straw clinging to the sweat sheen glistening on his chest. Lanky, roughneck handsome, with coarse, sandy hair hanging in his eyes. Exactly as she remembered him.

"Where did this buff come from, Luke?" Russo asked.

"We bought him down south a month back, Mr. Russo, from a breeding farm near Montrose. Hey, Frankie, how you doin'?" He asked it casually. Like it had been four days instead of four years.

"I'm doing a lot better than your buff," she snapped, trying to keep her rising temper under control. "Did you have the animal blood-tested?"

"His shot records came with his pedigree," Luke said. "Clean bill of health."

"Not brucellosis or bovine TB then," Frankie said firmly, turning back to Russo. "I'll know more after the autopsy."

"Whoa, who said anything about an autopsy?" Russo demanded. "He looks healthy as a horse. Hey! Hey, you dumb bastard!" he yelled at the buff as it passed. No reaction. "He's just a little spaced out, is all. Let's give him a couple days, see what happens."

"He doesn't have that long, Mr. Russo. He's not drinking and he's already hyperthermic. A few more hours in this sun, he'll collapse and go into convulsions. He should be put out of his misery now."

"Hell, I'll do it for you, doc," Mitch said, grinning, racking the action on his AK-47. "Where do you want him dropped?"

"Nobody shoots nothin' till I say so," Russo snapped. "I called you out here to make a diagnosis, lady, not to slaughter my animals. Can you tell me what's wrong with him or not?"

"Not yet, but—"

"Then we'll wait and see what happens with him! This buff cost me—"

"Quiet!" Frankie snapped, her eyes narrowing as the buffalo bull approached again in his endless circle.

"Who do you think you're talkin' to, lady?" Russo demanded.

But Frankie was already scrambling up and over the corral rails, dropping inside the enclosure only a few feet ahead of the plodding bull.

"Frankie! What the hell are you doing?" Luke yelled.

She was asking herself the same question as she walked backward, facing the bull, keeping just a step ahead of him. In the movies, buffalo appear slow and clumsy, but they can wheel and gore an attacker in a split second, butt them down or crush them underfoot. And bulls are notoriously unpredictable.

Ignoring the hubbub outside the corral, Frankie stayed focused on the great beast marching toward her. The bull snorted, a *whuff!* Tossing his head, reacting instinctively to her scent. But he made no move to hook her. When she finally stepped aside, he shuffled by her as if she weren't there.

And she wasn't. Not to him. Bison are often nearsighted, but

this bull was completely blind. And as he brushed past her, only inches away, she realized why. There was a tiny puncture wound in the corner of his left eye, crusted with blood and pus. A half dozen more nodes circled the eye socket. They could have been insect bites, but she didn't think so.

Pulling a scalpel pen out of her shirt pocket, Frankie removed the cap, exposing a narrow blade. Walking alongside the buff, matching him stride for stride, she deftly lanced two of the bumps near his glazed eye, extracting twin lead pellets the size of sesame seeds, her mouth narrowing grimly as she examined them. If the great bull felt the razor sharp blade slicing his face, he gave no sign.

Stepping away, she let the buff march past, then climbed back over the fence.

"What the hell was that about?" Russo demanded.

Opening her palm, she showed him the two bloody bits of gray metal. "They're pellets, Mr. Russo," she said coldly. "Somebody blasted that poor sonofabitch in the face with a load of birdshot. The BBs are so small they shouldn't have done any serious damage, but he had bad luck. One of the pellets zipped through the corner of his eye socket into his brain. I don't know whether the shot injured his optic nerve or the subsequent inflammation damaged it, but he's totally blind now and almost certainly brain damaged from cranial edema. He'll have to be destroyed."

"You're telling me these little bits of lead are killing my bull?" Russo said doubtfully, eyeing the tiny pellets. "Doesn't seem possible. Besides, nobody hunts with shotguns in Buffalo Country. What do you make of it, Luke?"

"Frankie's right," Sevier offered. "Those definitely look like lead pellets. Might be fragments from a ricochet, though. Your nephew gets awful trigger-happy out in the woods, Vic, especially at night. Shoots at anything that moves."

"Security's what I get paid for," Mitch snapped. "You stick to your job, Sevier, I'll do mine. What about the buffalo, Uncle Vic? Should I whack it out or what?"

"No, leave it be. I'll take care of it."

"But he's suffering," Frankie protested.

"He won't be for long," Russo said. "Come on into my office, doc, I'll cut you a check."

Reluctantly, Frankie trailed Russo up the porch steps into the massive log manor house, blinking in the dim light as the heavy oaken door closed behind her with a pneumatic *shush*.

The main room of the Buffalo Country clubhouse was as spacious as a basketball court. Overhead, wagon-wheel chandeliers

dangled from *Titanic*-sized anchor chains. One wall was paneled with sixty-inch TV screens, baseball, football, horse racing, and soccer competing simultaneously in silence as trophy animal heads stared sightlessly down from their mounts. Moose, elk, black and grizzly bears, but mostly bison bulls, magnificent even in death. A trophy hunter's dream. A conservationist's nightmare.

The air was hazy with cigar smoke and the buzz of conversation from a poker game at an octagonal table in a corner of the room, a half dozen men playing, clad in combinations of hunting garb and underwear. A few of them glanced up, checking Frankie out, then returned to their game.

No surprise there. At five two, a hundred and twenty pounds, with her Irish red hair cropped short as a boy's, Frankie McCrae was no glamour queen, and in khaki work clothes smudged with corral dirt and buffalo blood, she didn't look her best. But her day promptly improved.

Russo's office was a surprisingly comfortable room with knotty pine walls and an antique rolltop desk. A long rack of expensive hunting weapons lined both walls, everything from Davy Crockett flintlocks to BFG fifty-caliber express rifles that could punch through two bull elephants, end to end. In close quarters, Russo's jet black hair was obviously tinted and his cologne was a tad too strong. He was no piker, though. He quickly drew up a check.

"Is Frankie short for Francis or what?"

"It's not short for anything, my dad wanted a boy."

"From the way you went into that pen, he didn't miss by much. That took balls." He passed the check over.

"This is double my usual fee," Frankie said, scanning the amount.

"I figure a new vet in a small town can use the boost. Besides, you just saved me a bundle."

"I don't follow you."

"I paid over two grand for that bull, doc. Would've lost every dime if we'd destroyed him to do an autopsy. By risking your young neck to diagnose him on the hoof, you not only saved my investment, but one of those card players out there will fork over ten grand to take him as a hunting trophy."

"A trophy?" Frankie didn't bother concealing her disbelief. "For shooting a blind animal in a pen?"

"What's the diff? He's dead either way. Do you disapprove of hunting, doc? Or is it just killing you don't like?"

"I'm not a vegetarian, Mr. Russo, I know Big Macs don't grow on bushes. But your clients aren't hunters. They pay for the ego boost of killing a game farm buffalo, the bigger the better, so they can strut around thumping their chests like King Kong."

"Some guys definitely get off on killing," Russo conceded. "Gives 'em a rush like snortin' cocaine or gettin' laid, and I sell it the same way. If you were that buff, would you rather go out with a clean shot in the head? Or die in the woods, torn to pieces by a wolf pack? Mother Nature's a cold bitch, lady."

"Sometimes. It's still not nice to fool Mother Nature."

"How do you mean?"

"It was a TV ad when I was a kid, Mr. Russo. I don't recall what they were selling, but the punch line was, It's not nice to fool Mother Nature."

"Why not? What's she gonna do about it?"

"Nothing. She won't have to. If we kill off the game, cut the forests, and overheat the planet, we'll go the same route as the dinosaurs. A million years from now, intelligent cockroaches will hang our skulls on the wall and wonder how we could have been so dense."

"So it's not nice to fool Mother Nature," Russo nodded, chuckling. "I get it, doc. But you've gotta admit, foolin' Mother Nature may not be *nice*, but it sure does pay pretty well. Thanks for stopping by."

"You're welcome," Frankie sighed, pocketing the check. "Don't wait too long to drop that bull, Mr. Russo. Not because he's in pain, I'm sure you don't care. But he won't last long in this sun. And make sure the mighty hunter uses a big bore rifle this time. Blinding an animal with a birdshot is not only incredibly cruel, it's incredibly stupid."

She stalked out without waiting for his reply. And ran headlong into Luke Sevier, coming up the steps. He backed away, raising both hands in surrender.

"Don't rip into me, Frankie, I just work here. Can we talk?"

"We have nothing to talk about," she snapped, heading for her Jeep.

"I think we have. Meet me at Tubby's, around six o'clock," he called after her. "I'll buy the first round."

She almost told him to stick Tubby's, but he looked so damned earnest. And as handsome as ever. Slim and lithe as a riding crop.

"If I'm late, don't wait," she snapped, climbing into her Jeep. "I won't be coming." Which was a lie. She knew damned well she would.

Tubby's dining room was large and brightly lit, the glow of its elk horn chandeliers reflecting off the hardwood floors. Three pool tables beneath Tiffany lamps lined one side of the room, dark oak dining tables surrounded by heavy captain's chairs filled the rest.

It was crowded for a Tuesday in May. No summer people yet, just the usual mix of local singles who came to shoot pool and shoot the breeze, plus a few families who came for the cuisine, which is exceptional if you like venison.

Still angry from the afternoon, Frankie didn't bother to dress up. Clean jeans, a work shirt, and a Tigers baseball cap would do. North country chic.

Luke was waiting at a table for two against the wall. Frankie slid in across from him. Neither of them spoke for a minute, looking each other over.

Luke hadn't shaved for a few days, but Frankie liked the effect. The years had treated him lightly. He looked a bit leaner, but otherwise, he was much as she remembered, lanky, boyishly handsome, with tousled sandy hair, blue eyes.

"I was afraid you wouldn't come," he said. "You're probably mad at me, right?"

"Mad doesn't quite cover it," she said, keeping her voice level with difficulty. "Whatever else we were to each other, I thought we were friends. I can't believe you've been back for a while without even calling me."

"I got into some trouble in the Army," he said absently, looking away.

"What kind of trouble? Did you punch somebody out? Knock somebody up? What?"

"Is that pen in your pocket the same one you used on the bull? Can I see it?"

"Afraid I might use it on you?" she asked, sliding it across the table.

"Way cool," he smiled, uncapping it to reveal the scalpel blade. "By the way, climbing into the corral to operate on that buff was the craziest thing I've ever seen you do."

"It was either him or you, Sevier. Be careful with that blade, it's razor sharp."

"Is it?" Testing the edge with a fingertip, he whistled. Then plunged the scalpel into his thigh.

"What the hell!" she shrieked, lunging out of her seat. But there was no blood, and Luke's face kept the same quirky smile.

"Gotcha," he grinned, jerking the scalpel out of his leg. It squeaked as the blade came clear of the plastic beneath his jeans.

"You bastard," she said, laughing, shaken and moved, all at the same time. "What happened?"

"IED. Improvised explosive device. Blew our Hummer off the road outside Najaf. Took my left leg with it."

"My God. When?"

He hesitated. "Halfway through my second tour. Two years ago, give or take."

"And you couldn't pick up a phone? Let me know?"

"I didn't want you to see me like that, all smashed up," he said. "I needed to find out if I could manage on my own first. When I finally got out of the hospital, so much time had gone by . . . Hell, I figured you'd probably be married with a couple kids by now, Frankie."

"Well I'm not. Sweet Jesus, Luke . . ." Her voice trailed off, leaving them marooned in a strained silence.

"Hey, kids," Sheriff Stan Wolinski said, pausing beside their booth. A welcome interruption. "I noticed the Buffalo Country SUV parked out front, Luke, hoped I might find you here. Can we talk a minute?"

"Sure, Stan, pull up a chair."

Wolinski hesitated, glancing at Frankie.

"I've got no secrets from Frankie or anybody else, Sheriff. Take a seat or take a hike, all the same to me."

"Why not?" Wolinski sighed, settling his bulk into a chair. "Maybe I can kill two birds with one stone." Fortyish, the sheriff had an iron-gray brush cut and an attitude to match. He was carrying a few extra pounds, but his gray uniform concealed them well, solid as a sack of cement. "Saw your Jeep out at Buffalo Country today, Frankie. What were you doing out there?"

"Checking out an injured bull, why?"

"Our good sheriff is real curious about everything that happens out there," Luke said. "He's even got men posted on state land, watching us through field glasses."

"Those aren't my men, Luke. A lot of agencies are interested in your boss. FBI, DEA, BATF, could be any of them. Do you know who Russo is? Or what he is?"

"I know he gave me a job when nobody else would," Luke said simply. "Not even garbage companies will hire one-legged vets."

"Damn it, Russo's a mobster, Luke! Number two in the Costa crime family in Detroit. Drugs, prostitution—"

"I've heard the rumors, Stan. If he's guilty of all that, why don't you arrest him?"

"We will, maybe sooner than you think. The Feds are crawling all over his Detroit rackets. Why do you think he moved up here?"

"To manage the Buffalo Country game farm, which is a perfectly legitimate business."

"A business surrounded by a ten-foot fence, patrolled by armed guards."

"Watchmen," Luke corrected, "and amateurs at that. Russo's got

his nephew and a few Detroit rent-a-cops patrolling the grounds. He owns a lot of valuable stock, and this county's overrun with poachers, Stan. Like the LaRoche clan over there. Do they still grow reefer on state land? Maybe you should try bugging them."

Stan swiveled in his seat. The LaRoche clan were holding court at their usual table near the side door. A half dozen cedar savages, bearded, hard-eyed backwoodsmen dressed mix'n'match in camouflage pants, NASCAR T-shirts and ball caps. Sitting with their backs to the wall and a full view of the room. Bowie knives on their belts or in boot sheaths.

Frankie knew most of them. Arnie and Mal, the two oldest, ran the crew, along with Virgil, Mal's halfwit son. They'd bring in hunting hounds to be sewn up after a tangle with bears or boar coons. Always paid in cash, though none of them seemed to have jobs.

"Everybody knows about the LaRoches," the sheriff said grimly, turning back to them. "Vic Russo's in a different league, and you know it."

"Actually, I don't know it," Luke said, mildly. "I just tend stock and guide hunters for the man."

"You volunteered to serve your country once, Luke. We need your help again."

"No way, Stan. Government work didn't turn out very well for me."

"I heard about your leg. I'm sorry."

"Losing a leg wasn't the worst of it," Luke said. "I killed people over there, Stan. Did you know that?"

"No, I—"

"I was a perimeter guard. Anyone coming out of the desert got a warning shot at five hundred yards. If they didn't turn back, the next one was in the head. In fifteen months I dropped eleven men, one woman. Didn't know she was a woman. The way Bedouins dress it's hard to tell. She was sure enough packing a bomb, though. None of the others were, but she was. The army gave me a medal for killing her. For saving American lives, the citation said."

"I know it must be rough over there," Wolinski nodded sympathetically. "But, if she was armed—"

"I got no problem over killing the woman, Stan. She was trying to kill us. But those other poor bastards were just lost, looking for water. Nobody cared about them, not their government, certainly not mine. But I remember them. Every one. Can't sleep sometimes, remembering them. So don't give me a song and dance about serving my government, Stan. I did my hitch. I'm done."

"And it doesn't bother you that the man you work for is a criminal?"

"Sheriff, when kids in this town want to buy weed or speed or a hot gun, they don't come out to Buffalo Country. They just hit on one of the LaRoche brothers or their shirttail relatives."

"We've definitely got some local bad-asses," the sheriff conceded. "Which is why we don't need to import any more from Detroit."

"If Vic Russo breaks the law, lock him up, Stan. But don't ask me to be your snitch, and don't come sneaking around the game farm either. Mr. Russo's city boys don't know from Shinola about the woods. They get jumpy, especially at night, blasting away at shadows and such. I've seen 'em pump twenty rounds into a tree stump that didn't look right."

"Is that what happened to that buff?" Frankie asked. "One of Russo's nephews shotgunned him in the dark?"

"They don't carry shotguns. They're into heavier artillery, AK-47's with banana clips. So be damned careful, Stan. You could get your ass shot off by accident."

"That almost sounds like a threat, Luke."

"No threat. Just telling you how things are out there."

"Then I'll return the favor. The FBI's building a case against your boss. He's going to fall, Luke. I'd hate to see you go down with him."

"I'm not worried, Stan. If you can't handle local yokels like the LaRoche clan, Vic Russo's way out of your league." He winced, massaging his thigh.

"Are you all right?" Frankie asked.

"This damned leg gives me twinges when I sit too long," he admitted, rising. "It reminds me why I don't do government work anymore. Gotta go, I'm supposed to stand night watch. I'm . . . sorry I didn't call you, Frankie, I should have."

"You had a lot on your mind."

"I still have," he said, meeting her eyes. "Maybe we can talk about that sometime."

"Look, I didn't mean to interrupt—" Wolinski said, starting to rise.

"Stay put, Stan," Luke said. "I'm not very good company these days anyway. Take care, you two."

Luke stalked off without a backward glance, moving through the crowd, tall and straight with only the faintest trace of a limp. Frankie hadn't noticed it earlier, but she was aware of it now. Watched Luke all the way out the door. And realized the sheriff was staring at her.

"What?"

"I don't want to see that boy get in trouble over this Russo business, Frankie. Any chance you can talk sense into him?"

"I never could, Stan."

"I thought you two had, you know, a thing going."

"A long time ago. He's different now. I don't know this guy at all."

But she did, of course. Knew him right down to the ground. First loves may not be truest or best, but they're always first.

When Frankie was in veterinary school at Michigan State, she and Luke started dating during the summers, a heated affair that began as friendship, then caught fire, an overload of adolescent chemistry. They were the sweetest summers of her young life. Making love, being in love. They never discussed the future, but Frankie knew they'd have one.

Until the summer of her junior year, when she began to sense his restlessness.

"You'll be graduating with a degree next spring," Luke said quietly. "You'll be somebody. But what can I do, Frankie? Lumberjack for minimum wage? Guard pot fields for the LaRoches or mule their weed downstate to Saginaw or wherever? I know you love the North Country, but there's nothing for me up here."

"I'm up here," she countered, trying to josh him out of his mood. "Don't I count?"

"You mean one helluva lot," he admitted, cradling her head in the crook of his elbow. "Everything a guy could want."

Or almost everything. Luke wasn't much of a talker, but he voiced his dissatisfaction at being stuck in a small town more than once, musing about Ontario or Alaska. Anywhere but here.

Frankie tried to hold him with her body, giving herself to him with a savage abandon, exploring and experimenting in super-heated sessions that left them both exhausted. And exhilarated. And satisfied, she thought.

When she returned to school that fall, she expected his restlessness to pass. But when Luke's Christmas card said he'd enlisted in the Army, she was shaken, though not entirely surprised. On some level, she'd always known that he'd leave.

So she told herself it had only been puppy love anyway and tore into her studies, maintaining a 3.9 grade point average, graduating with honors. Working through the heartbreak and wreckage of her first love affair. Putting it all behind her.

Moving back to Algoma, she'd opened a small clinic and was holding her own, building up a practice. Doing just fine, thank you.

But now Luke was back. And injured or not, he was as magnet-

ic as ever. Perhaps more so. Even in the middle of their affair, when they couldn't keep their hands off each other, he'd never truly needed her. Or anyone else, really. He'd always been so quietly confident, so . . . complete.

Not anymore. There was a brooding darkness to him now, a vulnerability. Yet he was still Luke, with the same quirky smile, the same boyish heart. And from the moment he'd stepped out of that barn into the sunlight, she'd known that nothing was over for her.

Her feelings came rushing back in a flood. Anger and anguish and longing. Love, or something like it. Maybe this time they'd have better luck. This time, they'd get it right and recover what they'd lost.

But there was no time.

Frankie's bedside phone jangled her out of a dream at four in the morning.

"Frankie? It's Sheriff Wolinski. We need you out at Buffalo Country right away. We've got a helluva mess out here, a lot of animals shot up. Can you come?"

An ambulance speeding out of the game farm nearly ran her off the road as she wheeled into the Buffalo Country entrance. Up ahead, total chaos. State police and Algoma County sheriff's cars blocking the gate, strobe lights flashing madly. Abandoning her Jeep outside the line of police cars, Frankie grabbed her bag and trotted into the compound searching for Sheriff Wolinski. No problem finding him. In the glare of the game farm's halogen yard lights, the grounds were lit up like a prison break.

"Where's Luke?" she demanded. "Is he all right?"

"He's in one piece, but he's about the only one who is. We're holding him until I get a handle on what happened."

"What did happen?"

"According to Luke and Vic Russo, two LaRoche brothers came bustin' out of the woods, shooting at the main house, shooting at the animals, shootin' at anything that moved. There was one helluva gunfight, like something out of World War II. Vic's nephew, Mitch, got a scratch and Vic went with him in the ambulance to the hospital. Mal and Arnie LaRoche are both dead. One round apiece in the head. I'll have to see a ballistics report, but I'd guess Luke took them out."

"But it must have been self-defense!"

"Looks like it, but there has to be more to this. The LaRoches are thugs, but they're not crazy. Why the hell would they do a thing like this? Why would anybody do it?"

A buffalo cow bellowing in pain drowned him out, which was just as well. Frankie had no answers for him.

The next hour was a whirlwind of madness as she tried to tend the wounded animals. More than a dozen buffalo had been hit by stray rounds in the wild firefight, but strangely enough, none of them fled. They gathered near the barns instead, the only shelter they'd ever known.

In the wild, death comes to the bison on silent paws, as wolves pull down the young or sickly in a rush of snarling savagery. But on a game farm, the killers strike from a distance. High velocity slugs punch through muscle and bone, mushrooming deep inside the body cavities, pulping vital organs, smashing the great beasts down to thrash out their lives, bawling, struggling vainly to rise as the reports echo through the forest.

But bison never make the connection between death and the distant thunder. They have no reason to fear the humans who feed them, and in Buffalo Country the crack of rifles was as commonplace as a car backfiring on a city street. So even amid the bloody madness, the wounded and dying bison huddled near the out-buildings, forming small defensive rings with their young in the center, vainly trying to protect them from a threat they couldn't comprehend.

They weren't the only ones who couldn't understand it. Frankie ran out of Socumb, the sodium phenobarbital used to put down animals, in the first fifteen minutes. After that, Vic loaned her one of his deputies, Earl Nightcloud, a full blood Anishnabe, to follow her around with an AR-15 and administer a coup de grâce, a bullet in the brain of the hopelessly injured beasts.

A savage business, nothing humane about it. Bison have incredible constitutions, and even the grievously wounded didn't die easily. Bawling, they floundered about, spraying Frankie and Earl with blood and brains. A half an hour of steady slaughter ended the agonies of the terminally injured on the grounds, but a number of blood trails led off into the forest, and she had no doubt there were more wounded brutes out there dying in the dark.

Some of the buffs had caught stray bullets, but a good many more had been gunned down deliberately with a single round to the vitals. And from the pattern of dead and injured animals, it was clear the shots had been fired from the edge of the forest where the LaRoches had emerged.

They'd come charging out of the woods like mad dogs, slaughtering everything in sight. Utter insanity, as senseless as the Columbine killings or the murders at Virginia Tech.

With one major difference. The LaRoche brothers weren't face-

less strangers. Frankie knew them. They'd been to her clinic. She'd seen them at the supermarket and the hardware store. Even in Tubby's. She froze as an image flashed across her memory. Then she went in search of Stan Wolinski.

He was on the porch questioning Luke when Frankie stalked up.

"Were the LaRoches brothers alone?" she demanded.

"Arnie and Mal were the only ones we found," the sheriff said. "Why?"

"Virgil," Frankie said, "Mal's halfwit son, sixteen or so? Pale kid with hollow eyes? Whenever I see the LaRoches, Virgil's usually tagging along after them."

"You're right," Stan said, glancing around warily. "You sure it was only these two, Luke?"

"Hell, I don't know, Stan. I saw muzzle flashes from two weapons shooting at us from the treeline in the dark. I returned fire. If the kid was with them, he wasn't shooting."

"Maybe he got spooked and took off," Stan said.

"If he's out there, we have to find him," Frankie said. "If he stumbles into a wounded buffalo in the dark—"

"Let me help you search, Stan," Luke said. "Please."

"No way," Sheriff Wolinski said. "For now, you're under arrest."

"I'll wear handcuffs if you want, but this place is a thousand acres, and nobody else knows the game trails. We have to find that kid."

"I'm going too," Frankie said. "Virgil knows me."

"He may be armed," the sheriff warned.

"All the more reason to have somebody who can talk to him," she insisted. "He could be wandering around in the dark right now, scared out of his wits."

"Or waiting for us with an assault rifle," Luke added grimly. "Let's go."

A trek through hell. Luke in the lead with a halogen spotlight, Stan next, rifle at the ready, followed by Frankie, with Earl Nightcloud acting as the rear guard. Silvery light beams slashing across the surrounding forest like sabers, the sudden thunder of buffalo blundering away from them in the darkness, and the pitiful bawling of wounded animals.

And they left them there, suffering. To die in agony. Afraid that more gunfire might drive Virgil deeper into the forest. Luke had no trouble keeping to the path, the bison had trampled virtual highways through the forest, marked by trampled underbrush, piles of buffalo dung, and empty cartridge cases from the LaRoche brothers' mad rampage.

But no sign of Virgil. An hour of steady hiking brought them to

the game farm's back fence line. But not to the end of the trail. An ancient poplar, struck by lightning, had toppled across the fence, flattening the wire. The buffalo trail led across it, into the state forest beyond.

"What do you think?" Sheriff Wolinski asked Luke.

"They came through here," Luke said, focusing his beam on a spent cartridge, "and they were already killing when they did." Raising the beam, he picked out the blood-soaked hulk of a dead bison, forty yards off in the brush.

"For God's sake, why?" Frankie asked.

In the distance, a dying buff bellowed, then fell silent. As they pushed on, their light beams began picking up marks on the trees, gouges made by gunfire. Luke and Stan exchanged baffled glances.

A dozen yards farther on they broke into a clearing. An unnatural one. Rows upon rows of marijuana plants, four to six feet tall, were concealed beneath the forest canopy. Buffalo had obviously been grazing here, many of the plants had been chewed or trampled down.

"Virgil?" Frankie called into the darkness. "It's Dr. McCrae. Nobody's going to hurt you. Virgil? Can you hear me?" No reply.

"Something's wrong about this place," Earl Nightcloud murmured uneasily, shouldering his rifle, making a slow sweep scanning the forest. "Big-time wrong."

"Looks like your buffs have been doing government work whether they knew it or not, Luke," Stan said dryly. "Lucky thing they didn't eat all the evidence . . ." His voice trailed off. "Sweet mother of God," he whispered.

In the woods beyond the clearing, Stan's flashlight was locked on a truly ghastly sight. The body of Virgil LaRoche. Or what was left of it.

Half buried in a shallow grave, the boy's face had been shattered by gunfire. Most of his lower jaw was missing, baring his upper teeth in a horrible, lunatic grin.

Kneeling beside the corpse, Stan reached for the boy's throat to check his pulse, then withdrew his hand. It was pointless. His bloody wounds had already blackened, he'd clearly been dead for a day at least. Flipping open his cell phone, Stan notified the state police of their grisly find and asked them to dispatch an evidence team from Lansing.

Dazed, Frankie glanced around the clearing, trying to make sense of this final madness, and realized Luke had moved off alone to the edge of the clearing, leaning against a tree, hunched over, utterly ashen.

"Are you all right?" she asked, touching his shoulder.

"No," he said softly. "This is my fault, Frank. All of it."

"What are you talking about?"

"The other night at Tubby's, you asked me if Russo's nephew could have popped that bull with birdshot. And I got to wondering about that. Vic doesn't keep any shotguns on the place, so I guessed our fence might be down somewhere. Figured the buff had gotten out, raided somebody's garden, and caught a face full of birdshot for his troubles. I should have checked it myself, but my damned leg was acting up . . ." He shook his head grimly.

"So I sent Mitch and one of his goons out to look for the break. They're no good in the woods, but you don't have to be Dan'l Boone to follow a damned fence. But they must have run into Virgil out here. He probably fired a shot to warn them off, they shot back, killed him, then tried to cover it up. Only city boys would be dumb enough to think they could hide a body or anything else from the LaRoche brothers in the forest. When Mal and Arnie came looking for Virgil, they read what happened as easy as most folks read a newspaper. Then they came after the guys who did it. My fault. I should never have sent those two out here alone."

"You've got to tell the sheriff—"

"No!" he said, gripping her arm like a vise. "I have to tell Vic first! I owe him that. He trusted me when nobody else would, and none of this is on him. It's on me! We can't tell Stan, Frankie. Not yet. Promise me."

She hesitated, knowing it was a mistake. But he seemed so desperate, so lost . . .

"All right, talk to Russo first if it's that important to you. But in the morning, either you tell Stan or I will."

"Thanks, Frankie," he said gratefully. "Don't worry, I'll take care of it."

And he swept her into his arms, holding her close, keeping the madness at bay, and for a moment it was just the two of them again.

But only for a moment.

The next morning, radio and TV news stations were running nonstop stories on the shootout at the Buffalo Country Game Farm, the deaths of Arnie and Mal LaRoche, and the discovery of the boy's body half buried in the forest.

And Luke Sevier's confession that he'd killed the LaRoche brothers. All three of them. Including Virgil.

"You know his confession is bogus," Frankie insisted. "If he killed Virgil, why would he lead us to the body?"

"I don't know and I can't ask him," Sheriff Wolinski said. "Luke's lawyer is driving up from Detroit. I can't question him until he gets here."

"From Detroit? Did Luke choose this lawyer? Or did Russo?"

"All I know is, Luke requested counsel, the attorney's on the way, and there's not a damned thing I can do about it."

"Then maybe I can. He doesn't need a lawyer present to talk to a friend, does he?"

"No, ma'am, he certainly doesn't."

The small local jail had no visitors' room, so Stan gave them the use of the coffee room. Floors and walls tiled in institutional green. One small table, a few vending machines. And even wearing faded jailhouse fatigues, Luke looked good. Much more like the boy she remembered than the haunted vet who'd come home from Iraq.

"Hey, Frankie."

"Hey yourself, Sevier. What in hell do you think you're doing?"

"Don't start with me, Frankie. I told you I'd handle this, and I will."

"Going to jail is your idea of handling things?"

"My lawyer says we can cut a deal with the prosecutor. I won't face charges for the two oldest brothers if I plead guilty to killing Virgil."

"But you didn't kill Virgil! You weren't even there!"

"I'm still responsible, Frankie. Vic trusted me to run things and I let him down. Whatever I get I've got coming, for Iraq, if nothing else."

"Iraq has nothing to do with this!"

"It has everything to do with it, Frankie. My life went wrong there, maybe this is my chance to turn things around. Try to see—ah hell, why am I wasting my time? You don't get it. You never did."

"Get what? Look, I understand you feel grateful to Russo but . . ." She broke off, staring. Because suddenly she did get it. She looked away, swallowing hard. Not trusting herself to speak for a moment.

"How much?" she managed at last. "How much is Russo paying you to take the fall for his nephew?"

"A lot more than the Army ever paid. Enough that we'll be set when I get out. A nice home, a nice car—"

"I never cared about money, Luke. I still don't."

"That's because you've got a profession, a future. What do I have? Hell, I'm not even a whole man anymore. This is the only

chance I've got. Anyway, it's settled. Done deal. I won't be gone that long, Frankie, and when I come back—"

"You aren't coming back, Luke. Not to this town and not to me. We're finished. I know you didn't kill that boy, but you're protecting the thugs who did. There are a dozen more LaRoche brothers and cousins and shirttail relatives. If you come back here, one of them will kill you, or you'll kill him. It'll never end."

"But what about us? Doesn't what we had mean anything to you?"

"More than I can say. But even when we were together, you were looking to move on, Luke. If it hadn't been the Army, it would have been something else."

"It's my leg, isn't it?" he said bitterly. "You liked me fine when I was in one piece."

"I still care for you. I always will," she said, cupping his cheek with her palm, then letting it fall. "Take Russo's blood money, Luke, start fresh somewhere else. Have a good life."

"Damn, Frankie, don't go away mad," he called after her. And she knew if she looked back he'd be wearing that devilish grin.

So she didn't look back. She didn't dare.

Five weeks later, after a twenty-minute hearing behind closed doors, a judge accepted Luke's guilty plea and sentenced him to serve two and a half years in a prison downstate. For a crime he didn't commit. Leaving the LaRoche clan to bury their dead, while Frankie struggled to reassemble the wreckage of her life. Without Luke. Again.

The first week was the toughest. She was utterly miserable. She'd be talking to a client or treating a pet, suddenly find herself back in that horrible clearing with Virgil's half-buried body. Hearing a buffalo bawling in the distance. Dying in the dark.

She tried to think her way through it, to put the tragedy into perspective and find some kind of closure. But she just couldn't do it. Until she finally faced the ugly truth.

There couldn't be any closure. Not yet. Because it wasn't over.

It was all too unfair, on every level. Three LaRoche brothers were dead and buried in the ground.

Luke Sevier was as good as buried, too, locked in a cage of concrete and steel in Jackson Prison.

The only ones who came through the disaster unmarked were Vic Russo and his thug nephew. Russo rebuilt the fence around the Buffalo Country taller than before, topping it with gleaming rings of bayonet wire. The wounded bison were butchered or shot for trophies, then quickly replaced with fresh stock.

In a few weeks, Buffalo Country was back in business, as though nothing had happened. Russo was as untouchable as any emperor of old, safe and secure in his splendid manor house on the grounds of his killing farm. Where his fat-cat clients were free to resume the slaughter of the buffalo at ten grand a pop.

The injustice of it was simply more than Frankie could bear. It gnawed at her soul, keeping her awake nights.

She would lay there in the dark, unable to sleep, afraid to dream. Racking her brain, trying to come up with a solution. With no luck.

Until she happened to step in it. Literally.

A Labrador pup left a steaming deposit in her waiting room, which she discovered by accident. But as she was outside hosing the dog doo off her work boots, she stopped, frozen by a faint flicker of memory. Of a similar mess. Seen in the glare of a flash-light beam.

She didn't understand the connection at first.

The next morning, she was up at dawn, driving her Jeep down an abandoned logging trail in the state forest woodlands. After concealing the Jeep, she shouldered an empty backpack and set off on a long, circuitous trek. A snake with a broken back couldn't have followed her route, but Frankie'd grown up in these woods and knew exactly where she was going.

Two hours of hard hiking brought her to the burned-out pot field and Virgil LaRoche's empty grave. Kneeling a moment, she said a brief prayer for the lost boy whose death had caused so much havoc, then set to work.

Circling the fire-blackened clearing, she began gathering up dried lumps of buffalo dung, but only those left behind by the blinded buff who'd raided the marijuana field. His scat was easy to spot. It was speckled, flecked with undigested seeds.

After filling her knapsack, Frankie hiked along the perimeter fence on the back side of the Buffalo Country. Choosing her sites carefully, she began chucking fistfuls of seeded dung over the bayonet wire, where it landed soundlessly, scattering over the moist green earth.

By the end of the long day, she was covered with mud and mosquito bites and smeared with buffalo dung. And filled with a sense of grim satisfaction.

As the summer wore on, she made two more trips to check on her handiwork: Fertilized by the rich dung, the marijuana seeds quickly took root and shot up like the weeds they are, undisturbed and undiscovered, far from the game trails and baited shooting blinds where Russo's clients played at their savage sport.

In the second week of September, after a final hike to be sure the marijuana stalks were tall enough, Frankie dialed up Sheriff Wolinski and gave him precise directions to the sprawling marijuana patches inside the fence in the remote corners of Buffalo Country.

The day of the bust, she parked across the road from the game farm, sipping coffee from a thermos, watching as the FBI and the local sheriff's department conducted a joint raid, hauling Vic Russo, his nephew, and a dozen clients out of the posh clubhouse in handcuffs.

Perhaps it wasn't entirely fair. Growing reefer was one of the few crimes Russo hadn't actually committed, but she could live with that. He was guilty of far worse. Drugs and prostitution and murder. And bribing a wounded backwoods boy who'd lost his leg and most of his soul fighting for his country.

But for Frankie, Russo's greatest crime was the Buffalo Game Farm itself. Raising animals for the depraved pleasure of slaughtering them is a capital crime against the planet. And this Earth is the only one we have.

She warned Russo that first day, and he laughed at her.

But she wasn't joking.

It's not nice to fool Mother Nature. ♫



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THE ROAD TO THE AIRPORT

DONNA THORLAND

“We’re not going to make it.”
“We’ll make it.”

Frank says this kind of thing because Frank always makes it. Frank makes things happen. He doesn’t have to get places on time, hustle for jobs, work at things the way I have to. He’s Frank. The world bends to accommodate him.

“I told you to get me up.” I hear the words leave my mouth, and I know already how childish they sound.

“I set the alarm.”

“It’s not enough. I can’t get up with just the alarm. You have to wake me,” I tell him, certain I’ve said it a thousand times before.

We’re only twenty minutes from the airport if you take the highway. Twenty minutes, maybe less, because it’s four in the morning, and no one else is on the road. But we don’t have twenty minutes. Not the way security is now.

“You know I don’t like to do that. If you want to get up, you’ll get up,” Frank tells me. And that’s true, for him. If Frank wants to be awake, he breaks from the confines of our bed and strides into the day, alert, adroit, refreshed, while I struggle toward consciousness from beneath an engulfing wave of sleep, tangled in sheets like seaweed, drowning in the cool dark.

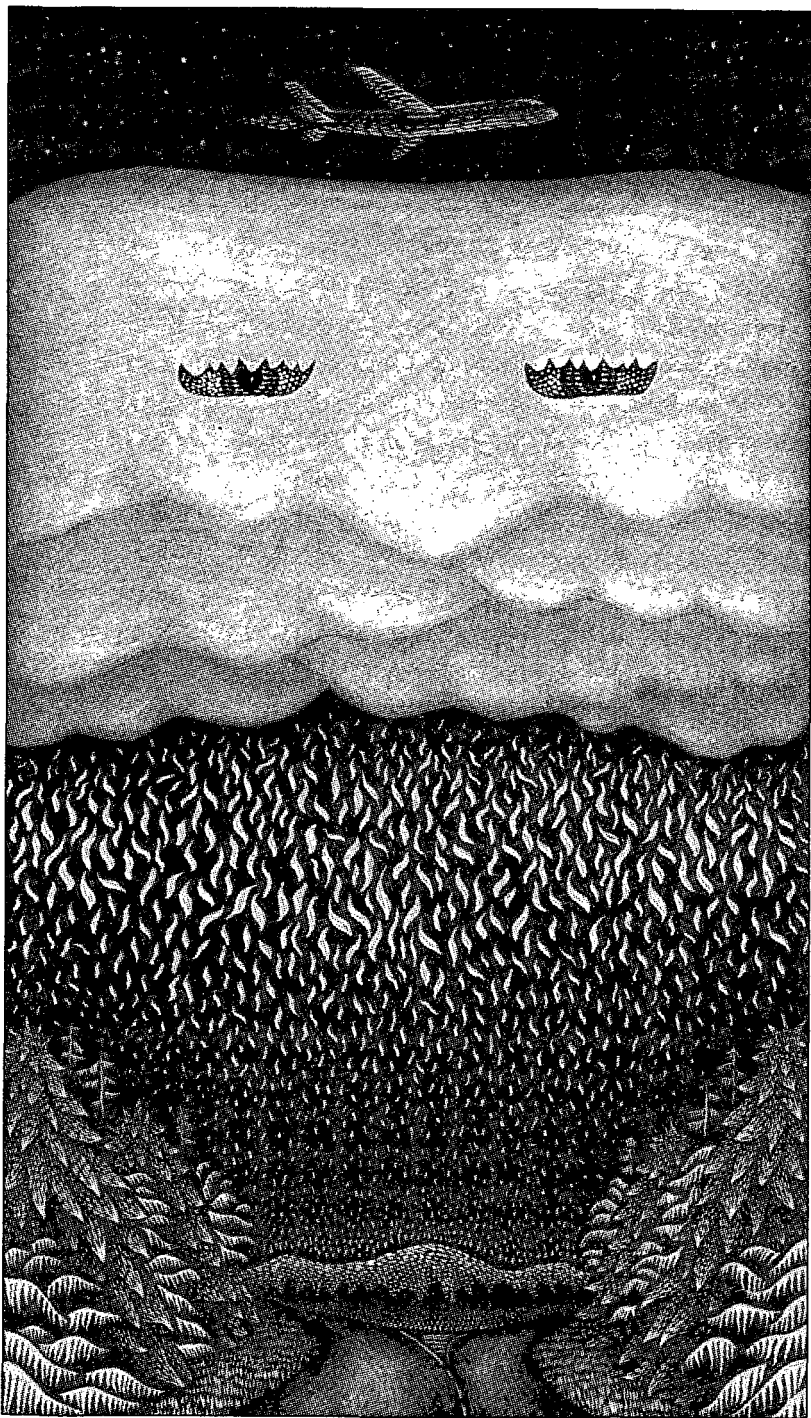
“You’ve missed the ramp.” I see it flash past us, and watch it recede into the distance, like my chances of catching this plane, landing this job. And then it’s gone.

“We’ll make it. There’s an access road up here that runs straight across the meadow. It’s got to cut the trip in half.” He says this with such confidence that I believe him, until we turn, smooth asphalt sailing into waves of chop gravel.

There’s a gate barring the road. Our headlights slice across it and reveal the opening to be wide enough for a car to fit through.

“It’s not even paved,” I point out.

“It is—ahead,” Frank insists.



"Have you ever come this way before? Do you even know where this leads?"

"I've always meant to try it."

The road smooths out and we're floating again over placid, unblemished tarmac.

"This isn't the time for an experiment." I want this to be Frank's fault, even though I know it isn't. "I'll miss my plane."

Once, when it was my birthday, Frank ordered me a chocolate cake from the bakery down the street. When we went to pick it up, the baker had lost Frank's order. He hadn't made a chocolate cake.

Check again, Frank told him. *Check in the back.*

I didn't make any chocolate cakes.

It's okay, I told Frank. It didn't have to be chocolate.

Your cake is chocolate, Frank had insisted.

The baker returned a moment later with a chocolate cake. The world works like that for Frank.

"If you miss it, then it wasn't your plane," Frank says, simple as that, but I can tell by the way he scans the road that for once he isn't certain.

We're driving across a meadow, or a swamp, it's difficult to tell which in the light, the terrain rising on either side of us into flanking dunes, forming like clay beneath a child's hands. It looks just like all the land surrounding every airport. It's scrubby, undeveloped, empty, with a constant nimbus of yellow light just on the horizon indicating the vast expanse of the runways. Useless land that no one travels, no one lives on.

We're going east, or must be, because the airport is east. And the sky should be lightening with the dawn, but it isn't. I turn in my seat, to see the sulfur yellow glow of the highway disappear. Ahead we're traveling into blue gloom, into night, which is just plain wrong.

"We're going the wrong way. It should be getting lighter, not darker. We should be heading east to the airport, into the sunrise."

"The road probably twists and jogs around the runways."

"What runways?"

For the first time since I have known him, Frank does not have the answer.

Suddenly we're traveling uphill, and we emerge from between the scrubby dunes into something else entirely.

It's nothing like an access road to an airport: too manicured, landscaped, terraced, to be anyplace near the airport. High, fine curbs border perfect rolling grass hills dotted with street lamps, their pendant globes bright white in the blue gloom.

"This can't be between our house and the airport. We must be going the wrong way."

"We can't be driving away from the airport." Frank is confident, assured. "We'd have crossed back over the highway, and we haven't."

His reasoning is faultless, but nothing *feels* right. The blue light outside has drenched the car, inside and out, tinting every surface a shade of blue. My hands, cyanotic; my pants, my bag, all blue. The manicured, rolling lawns stretching as far as the eye can see are blue as well; a world floored with sky.

And it's getting cold.

Overhead are highway signs, blank white staring slabs mounted on steel posts.

"The signs are blank. Let's turn around. Let's go back." My voice sounds shrill and far away.

"This must be a new development."

It's an excellent explanation, but wrong.

"Then there wouldn't be signs at all. No one hangs blank signs."

"We'll never make it on time if we turn back." Frank pats my knee, but I can't feel the warmth of his hand. "We've made a decision, and now we're committed to it. We'll keep following the road and we'll hit the airport."

That's when it starts snowing. I try to think of a late April snow shower in recent memory but can't. The lawns now appear frosted, and the trees are spangled with pale blue ice. I close my eyes because I don't want to see any more. I'm convinced we've driven out of the real world and into someplace else.

I'm jolted awake when the car stops moving. I expect to open my eyes to the concrete ramps and car exhaust of the departing flights level, but the world is still blue, still icy crisp and oddly new.

"Why have we stopped?"

"To ask directions."

The road ahead is forked and the white staring signs are silent above.

Frank rolls my window down, and I see him. There is a man standing on the grass. He looks lost. White-blond hair, tinted cobalt by the strange dawn light, frames a sharp nose and vacant, anthracite eyes.

He's dressed for the wrong climate: short pants and T-shirt, with thick-soled canvas shoes, all dyed blue by the light. He's carrying a skateboard in his hand, hanging low at his side.

"Which road to the airport?" Frank calls out.

"Just drive." I say it quietly.

The man on the grass looks up at the white signs and back down to us.

"Please drive. There's something wrong here." I start sliding my window up, but Frank slides it back down.

The man begins to cross the lawn, slow, dreamlike, the skateboard dragging a furrow in the frozen grass.

When he reaches the car he collapses like a released marionette to crouch at my window, all stiffness gone from his frame. There's frost on his eyelashes. He looks like a frozen corpse, but when he speaks his voice is bathetic, full of the round stoner vowels of the West Coast, languid, helpful, mundane.

"Take the left fork, dude, to the airport. That way." He points.

Frank thanks him. We drive away. I look back and he is still crouched at the curb. I catch a glimpse of that curb in the mirror, and he is gone, just as the dim blue world erupts into pink and yellow light. My ears pop, as though we've changed altitude, and everything sounds louder and clearer. Ahead is the road, the airport.

Gravel spins once more under our tires before we make contact with the surface of the main road. We shoot past ramps and terminals and are *inside*, breathless at the check-in before I can find my wallet, identification, tickets.

Most of the counters are still closed. The tiny, sleepy airlines don't fly this early. There's a sealed-off silence in here, a world apart from the windy ramps outside. We're long past my boarding time, but there's a chance that the plane hasn't left.

Even for the hour, though, my counter is unusually subdued. Frank has gone to park while I make my mad dash for the gate, nursing hope, though it feels likely my journey will end here, at the check-in counter. The ticket agents talk in whispers, examine my identification over and over, huddle to confer in low tones I can't make out.

I interrupt their conference. "If I've missed my flight, can you put me on another? Maybe with another airline? I've got an interview."

The ticket agent who breaks away from the group to speak with me has a funereal air about her. I'm *not* going to make it to this interview.

"I'm sorry," she tells me, "but there's been an accident on the runway. With your plane. It happened about fifteen minutes ago, during take-off. We don't know when the next flights will be cleared."

"What kind of accident?" I ask, but I've already guessed the answer.

There's a light, empty space in my stomach, spreading up through my body. Fifteen minutes ago, Frank was driving me end-

lessly through a twilight landscape, somewhere between our home and the airport. Somewhere I don't think I could find again.

The doors behind me hiss open, and I know without turning that it's Frank.

"Would you like us to call you when we know something?"

I thank them and follow Frank back out to the car. He says nothing as we drive. We take the highway this time, and though I search, I do not see the entrance to the service road we traveled.

It occurs to me as the car speeds along that there is no service road cutting across the meadows. The world bends to accommodate Frank. He wanted a shortcut to the airport, just like he wanted a chocolate cake for my birthday, and one appeared. He bent the world around him.

Later, at home during the long morning, I feel like an unexpected guest in Frank's planned, solitary day. In the afternoon I begin to wonder if Frank really did make the long, undulating road through the blue hills, or if, for the first time in a life of certainty, he found himself lost. I begin to wonder if he created not the meandering shortcut through the meadow, but the steep descent and fiery destination of the plane I would have, should have boarded. *R*

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DEATH ROW

MICHAEL Z. LEWIN

“But it’s my only chance,” Morrison said. “It’s my *last* chance.”

Katy drank from her pint. Then she shook her head slowly, dismissively. “What do you need to be on television for anyway? I’ve never been on television. I don’t feel less a person because of it.”

“You’d avoid being on the telly, if what you’ve been telling me all these years is true.”

“Oh, it’s true all right.” She dropped her eyes. “And I can’t even tell you most of it.”

“So you always say,” Morrison said. He finished his own pint as Katy’s head snapped up, a frown on her face. “And I’m not disbelieving you. I’m not. You’ve lived one hell of a life. One that would put most men to shame. One that puts *me* to shame. But that’s not the point. The point is that here I am, seventy-eight years old, and I’ve never been on the television and now I got a chance and all I’m asking for is a little help.”

“A *little* help is what you call it?” Katy rubbed her face.

“It’ll be like riding a bike,” Morrison said. His wry expression silently added, “if what you’ve been telling me all these years is true.”

“I still don’t get why it’s so damned important to you.”

“It’s *television*,” Morrison said. “It’s the modern age. Everything is on the telly. Everybody is on the telly. You’re nothing if you haven’t been on telly. Unless, of course, it’s your personal choice. But my grandkids, I can tell by the way they look at me, they think I’m a slug because their mother thinks I’m a slug, but if suddenly, there I was, on the TV, then that’d all change. There’d be some respect in their eyes. I’ve been waiting all my life to see some respect in my grandkids’ eyes.”

“Your grandchildren are twenty-two and twenty-eight, Mo. And when was the last time you even spoke to the twenty-eight-year-old?”

“Okay, Colin’s a DJ or impresario or whatever queer thing he’s went and made himself. But there’s little Becky.”

“Who has two kids of her own and lives in a council house.”



"So maybe it's my *great*-grandkids I want some respect from."

"When's the last time you saw them?"

"If I was going to be on the telly I could call Becky up, tell her when, visit her. Maybe we could watch it together with the greats. It could be the start of a whole new phase of my life. I could be a real grandfather to these ones. I could teach them things. I could tell them stories. And they'd listen because they could tell their friends, That's my great-granddad and he was on the TV news."

"You really believe it makes that much difference to them?"

"It's television. What else do they know at their ages?"

"What's their ages?"

"Four and five."

"You sure?"

"Or thereabouts."

Katy sighed. She drank from her beer, finishing it. "You want another?" She stood up. "Same again?"

"And why are we sitting out here?" Morrison said. He gestured around the small garden.

"Because it's a nice evening?"

"Instead of in there. You see anybody else out here because it's a nice evening?"

"Just as well, considering what you're asking me to do."

"It's just that it's not that nice an evening, that's my point," Morrison said. "Only tourists would sit out here else by choice."

"You're just after the ten-percent discount."

Morrison shrugged. "I'm not a rich man. But that's not the point."

Katy carried his glass and her own to the back door of the public house.

"It's *not* the point."

She lifted her shoulders in a shrug, knowing he would see it as she headed indoors for the bar.

"It's not the point," Morrison said to himself. "I got me a chance to go on the television, and all I'm asking is a little help."

A few minutes later a young couple came to the door of the garden. The woman pointed to the other table and asked, "Is that table taken?"

"Yes," Morrison said. "A family. With grandkids. Sorry."

The young couple retreated into the interior of The Sun and Moon. A moment later Katy came back out. She glanced back, probably seeing the retreating couple. "They wanted to be alone," Morrison said. "Didn't want a table next to some old codger."

Katy sat down. "And his old lady friend."

"You're not old."

"I'm as old as you."

"No you're not."

"Because I'm eleven months younger? That's near as makes no difference at our age, Mo."

"You don't look it."

"Thanks, I suppose."

"And you don't act it. You move like a gazelle."

She laughed. "How would you know how a gazelle moves? Especially an arthritic one."

"You're going to tell me you know about gazelles? All that glamorous life you've led. Adventures this part of the world and that."

Katy tilted her head as if she might contest the idea that she'd had adventures. Instead she said, "Hardly glamorous."

"You've been all over the world. Where have I ever been? Not even on the telly."

"I haven't been that many places."

"Africa?"

"Well . . ."

"Far East?"

"Sitting in an Army office most of the time."

"Sitting. Oh right. Not doing anything. I believe *that*. And the Earth is flat."

"It is."

"What is?"

"The Earth. Flat."

He stared at her, his hand around his new pint.

"In places." She laughed.

"Ha bloody ha," he said. He lifted his glass. "Cheers."

They touched glasses. They both drank.

"I know you can't tell me all what you did," Morrison said. "Not even now. Not even when there's nobody I could tell it to anyway."

"I signed the Official Secrets Act," Katy said. "There's a lot don't take that seriously now, but I do. It's an oath."

"And I respect you for that."

"I'll tell you this much, though," she said after a deep drag on her drink. "If I was a young woman now, the adventures I could have, same kind of career, they'd leave what I actually did in the dust. They're in the SAS now, you know."

"Who?"

"Women. There's about nothing that the blokes in the Army do that the women don't do now." She shook her head.

"There's some been killed in Iraq," Morrison said. "Women. Soldiers."

"The risk is part of what they pay you for."

"Anyhow, you wouldn't have been much good undercover against the Mau Mau. Or in Korea. Or Suez."

"The SAS isn't about undercover. It's about getting in there to do a job and then getting out again without being caught."

"Or Malaya." He drank.

Katy sat quietly.

He said, "Northern Ireland . . ." He looked at her. "You could have been over there. You were over there."

"Strictly in an administrative capacity," she said. "But if it was going on these days, the job I could have done as a woman . . . There are things women can do that the men couldn't. They've finally learned that." She sighed, a sigh for the glamour and adventure she'd missed out on because she'd been born at the wrong time.

"The Falklands. The two Iraqs," Morrison said. "There's always some bloody war or 'nother. If it isn't us fighting as ourselves, it's as part of the U.N. And women are in them all these days."

"You're not wrong about that. But you know what?"

"What?"

"You know the demilitarized zone they left in Korea after they stopped? Barbed wire across the whole peninsula, however many miles wide?"

"What about it?"

"It's nature reserve now, good as. They've got species thriving in there that are rare in the rest of Korea. It's all because they're safe in that strip across the country because nobody's allowed in there. I read about it the other day."

Morrison smiled. "War is good for something, then."

"Unresolved war is. Speaking of which, did you know that the Second World War didn't end till 1989?"

Morrison's eyes narrowed.

"It's true," Katy said.

"That's silly."

"The war was against Germany, wasn't it? The whole of Germany. Well, it wasn't till the Berlin Wall came down and Germany was reunited that the war against Germany—the whole of Germany—could officially end." She lifted her glass. "It's true."

He scratched his head. "You're full of information tonight," he said with some admiration.

"I just read. Keep my eyes and ears open."

"And it keeps you young. I'll bet if I was to tell my great-grandkids that, about the war, they'd be impressed. I'm sure they would. They could pass on true facts that their great-grandfather told them to their pals. And it's not as if they're going to have their great-grandfather around forever now, is it?"

"Seventy-eight isn't that old these days."

"Farty Freddy's ninety-two," Morrison said.

"My point exactly."

Morrison was silent for a moment. Then he asked, "How are they in there?"

"Where?"

"Don't play dumb," he said. "It doesn't suit you. On the bench, of course."

"They're fine."

"All present and correct."

"Freddy's there."

"And all the others?"

"Bert and Mike."

"Not Jack?" Morrison's eyes lit up a little.

"Don't get excited. They haven't called for an ambulance. There was a drink in his place. I'm sure he just went to the gents."

Morrison nodded, having a natural sympathy for any man past a certain age who needed to go to the gents. "Freddy talking to himself?"

Katy nodded.

"And farting?"

"There was . . . an air about him."

"He doesn't even change his clothes, you know. He'd still smell, but not half so much if he'd at least bloody do that."

"I don't know why you want a place on the bench so badly."

"Yes you do."

She looked around, although they were alone in the small garden area. The habit of caution built up over a lifetime? "If you want it so badly, why don't you do it yourself?"

"I don't have the expertise, do I?"

"A frail old geezer like that. How much expertise does it take?"

"I've thought about it, Katy."

"Well then. Resolve is half the battle."

"That sounds like something written over a coat of arms. Or on a medal."

"If you want it done so badly, why don't you just do it?"

"He'd never let me in his flat."

"That's the problem?"

"He lives down the road. He doesn't even have to cross a street to get to the pub and back. If he had to cross a street it would be a different matter altogether."

"It would?"

"I could rent a car. I could take him at the intersection."

"Do you have a driver's license these days?"

"I could steal a car."

Katy rolled her eyes.

"It doesn't matter, does it? Freddy shuffles home. Two minute walk, takes him fifteen minutes. Doesn't even cross a street."

"Fifteen minutes?"

"Okay, six or seven. But the point is, he walks along a busy road, but doesn't cross it. The only thing he does in his whole life is walk to the pub and back. Everything else they bring to him."

"Who brings what to him?"

"I told you, he doesn't have kids. Had a boy once—he'll tell you about it if you get close enough to talk to him."

"Thanks but no thanks."

"Boy got run down himself. Decades ago. Now he's got nobody. Social services bring him his shopping, take him to the doctor. They ought to bloody see he changes his clothes and gets fumigated, but no such luck."

"You're absolutely sure he has no family?" Katy said.

Morrison blinked. "Yes." He began to ask why she'd asked but instead said, "He'd let you inside, no problem. A bit of disguise in case someone saw you at the door, but he'd just take you for one of the social service busybodies."

"Disguise, not getting caught, none of that would be a problem," she said.

Morrison nodded. If what Katy'd been saying about her life and her background was even half true . . . But did she still have the bottle?

"The problem would be figuring out why on Earth I would want to take out an old man like that?"

"Air pollution?"

"Seriously."

"As a favor to me?"

"That's the problem, see, Mo. You say it's all about getting yourself on the telly."

"I've explained that."

"Your Becky isn't going to let you back in her life just because your face is on the box."

"The reporter would talk to me. I'd say something about her. I'd wave to her. And the kids."

"If you really wanted to do something to get a place back with her, you'd sell that house of yours. Give her some money. Get her out of the hole she's in."

"Sell my house?"

"If you really wanted to do your granddaughter and her kids some good, that's what you'd do."

"They already get it in my will."

Katy shrugged.

Morrison snorted. He thought it was quietly to himself, but it was a sharp sound, louder than he expected. Then he said, "Okay, I'll do it. I'll sell the house."

"Really?"

"If you'll just get me on the telly."

Charlene Brockman of *Today In The West* said, "And now we have a story that we thought was going to be a lighthearted tribute to our postal service."

"Oh yes?" Paul Worthy, her cohost, asked rhetorically.

"But it's been colored by unexpected tragedy. Nadia Norris has the details for us this afternoon."

The young and attractive face of Nadia Norris came up on the screen. "I'm standing outside The Sun and Moon public house in Bath," she said. "It's one of the city's oldest and most traditional pubs. And they really do value their traditions here."

The picture changed to a wooden bench inside the pub. "And this is one of them. This simple bench, the closest seating to the bar, is known as 'Death Row.' Now that isn't meant to be as chilling a name as you might think. It's just that space on the bench is traditionally reserved for the pub's oldest regular customers. The Sun and Moon's landlord, Keith Waters, knows the story."

The camera drew back to include the face of the landlord, who said, "It was called Death Row long before I came to the pub, about eight years ago. But we were happy to continue the tradition and show a bit of respect. So our oldest regulars get a special bench—the closest to the bar, so they don't have to walk so far. And they also get a little discount off their drinks."

Back to Nadia. "It's been *such* a tradition at the pub, and so well known, that they even get post." She held up a card. "Here is the latest delivery, a postcard from a member of the staff who's on holiday in Scotland. Look, all that's on the address is Death Row, Bath."

The camera closed in on the postcard, showing the brief address.

"Yet," Nadia said, "the card was delivered to the pub only two days after it was posted. I've got Howard Hilsomely, the postie for the street, here to explain how it happened."

The camera turned to Hilsomely, who said, "When the card came into the sorting office some of the new lads thought it was a creepy joke. But a lot of us know about Death Row, and the pub has been on my route for years. So, no problem."

"Not rain or sleet or snow or the most minimal of addresses can

stop the Royal Mail," Nadia said, now back inside the pub. "And when you got the card, Keith, what did you do?"

"I thought people might be interested in knowing what a fine postal service we still have here," the landlord said. "So I invited Howard in and rang you folks at *Today In The West*."

"Cheers," Howard, the postie, said, lifting a glass.

"However," Nadia said, "before we could get our camera crew over to Bath to cover the story, The Sun and Moon's Death Row was hit by tragedy."

"It's a bit of a blow," Keith said, again on camera. "Our oldest member of Death Row, Freddy Loriner, unfortunately died in his sleep day before yesterday. He hadn't been well, and he was ninety-two." Keith lifted a pint. "Here's to you, Freddy, mate."

"Without becoming morbid about it," Nadia said, "you must be used to occasional deaths among the members of Death Row."

"Of course," Keith said, wiping foam from his lips. "One reason we carry on the tradition is to make the last years of our older customers a little more comfortable. But, when it does happen, well, we know we've done our bit."

"And what happens when a spot on the bench becomes vacant?"

"The existing members shuffle along—we keep people's places in strict order of age."

"And the new place?"

"Goes to the next oldest regular on the list."

"You keep a list?"

"Oh yes."

"So who has filled Freddy's place?"

"Well, unfortunately, that's another sad story. The next regular on the list was Morrison Mason. Unfortunately, Mo was hit crossing the road on his way home just last night. It was a hit-and-run and he was killed immediately, poor old bloke. I know he was particularly looking forward to meeting you today, Nadia."

Nadia turned to the camera. "So our lighthearted story has a tinge of tragedy." She held up a photograph. "If any of our viewers in Bath, or driving through Bath last night, saw this man at the corner of Lansdown Road and the London Road, and saw what happened, we—and the police—would be very grateful for the information."

"So would we," said Keith, off camera.

"But tradition is tradition," Nadia said. "Although traditions do evolve over time."

The camera pulled back.

Nadia said, "I have Katy Butterworth here with me. And I have

to say, you don't look nearly old enough to qualify for a place on the bench, Katy."

"Thank you," Katy said.

"But you are, aren't you, the newest member of Death Row?"

"I am, and proud of it. Although it's awful that poor Mo wasn't able to take his place for more than the one night. I know for a fact that it meant a lot to him. And I know that if he'd been able to appear on your program he'd have sent his love and best wishes to his granddaughter, Becky, her two kids, and to his grandson, Colin."

"You're seventy-seven years old, Katy, if you don't mind my saying so."

"That I am."

"How do you stay looking so young?"

"Clean living. Regular exercise. And a pint or two of Keith's excellent ale."

"And you are—this is right, isn't it?—you are the very first woman ever to take a place on Death Row, aren't you?"

"I believe I am," Katy said. "It's a pleasure and a privilege. In its way, the fulfilment of a lifetime's ambition." ♣

Solution to the January/February "Dying Words"

WORD LIST

- A. Oilcloth
- B. Tattling
- C. Thanatos
- D. Oxymoron
- E. Pathetic
- F. Eclipses
- G. New York
- H. Zimbabwe

- I. Lakehurst
- J. Ezekias
- K. Ribbons
- L. Yataghan
- M. Eminence
- N. Attention
- O. Rekindled
- P. Shading
- Q. Ogden Nash

- R. Finished
- S. Staccato
- T. Unwitting
- U. Scratchpad
- V. Panama hat
- W. Establish
- X. Nodded off
- Y. Situating
- Z. Epidemic

QUOTATION

Author—OTTO PENZLER

Work—(50) YEARS OF SUSPENSE (*The New York Sun*, June 7, 2006)

"What killed . . . fiction magazines was the introduction . . . of the paperback book . . . It is into this abyss that *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* decided to leap . . . and, against odds longer than Nathan Lane winning the next Miss America pageant, continues to be published . . ."

REEL CRIME

STEVE HOCKENSMITH

Just as the English have Boxing Day after Christmas, when everyone sweeps up the torn wrapping paper and ribbons, Hollywood has "Dumping Month." Only instead of throwing out the trash, the studios book it into multiplexes across the country.

Yes, it's no coincidence the only good movies out in January are the holdovers from November and December. Tinseltown's execs figure you're not going to bundle up and dig the car out of a snow drift to get to the theater—and then they make sure you won't by releasing nothing but dreck.

That's where we come in. Every winter—well, last winter and this winter, anyway—we've asked ask top crime writers to recommend the mystery and thriller DVDs that'll help you while away the weeks until the weather (and the selection at the cinemas) improves.

Here's this year's flurry of AHMM Winter Film Fest picks:

Megan Abbott, author of the noir thrillers Queenpin, The Song Is You, and Die a Little

I Wake Up Screaming (1942), based on Steve Fisher's eponymous crime novel, is a dark little gem that's remembered today



Betty Grable, Carole Landis, and Victor Mature in *I Wake Up Screaming*.

mostly as a proto-film noir—it's half Betty Grable pic, with its beaming fresh-faced star, glittery nightclub scenes; and jaunty banter, and half dread-drenched noir, complete with crossbar shadows, a wrong-man plot, and a slithering perversity at its core. But genre history

aside, its pleasures are manifest: the hard-candy loveliness of Carole Landis (a real-life Hollywood tragedy: dead by suicide at

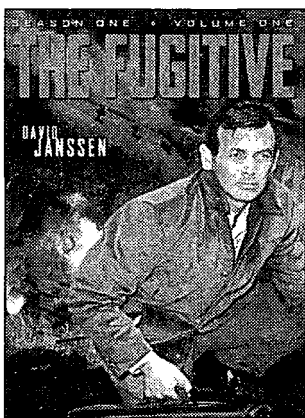
twenty-nine) as the murder victim; baby-chick Grable teetering in prim hat and heels through epic seediness, floridly handsome and knowing Victor Mature at her side; and sublimely creepy Laird Cregar reminding us that, behind the glitter, there lies a darkness.

Marcia Muller, MWA Grand Master and author of the Sharon McCone mystery series

There are rumors that when *Body Heat* first opened in snowy climes in 1981, people ripped off their clothing to dispel their own heat as they ran from theaters. Couples headed for the nearest motels. The heat—it's a palpable force throughout the movie. But what really entrances me about this film is the excellent portrait of a self-admitted loser (played by William Hurt) collaborating in his own destruction with an amoral woman (played by Kathleen Turner). In an interesting twist in the final scene, we find that Turner's character has also been destroyed: She achieves her ambition to be rich and live in an exotic land, but the woman pictured in those last frames is totally empty. Fascinating characterization, plenty of suspense, and oh, that heat!

Bill Pronzini, author of the Nameless Detective mystery series

The Fugitive was my favorite TV series of the '60s, and one of the best of all time. David Janssen was outstanding as Dr. Richard



The Fugitive © Paramount Home Video

Kimble, wrongly convicted of murdering his wife, freed by a train wreck on his way to the death house, and on the run from the Javert-like police lieutenant, Philip Gerard, obsessed with his capture. Character-driven story lines that involve the viewer in Kimble's one-man-against-the-world plight make the various episodes as compelling today as they were forty-some years ago. The first season is—finally!—available on DVD, with the other four scheduled to follow shortly. A must-own set for every fan of classic TV.

C. J. Box, author of the Joe Pickett mystery series

How sad it is that the seminal (literally) film *Rancho Deluxe* isn't more well known. Written by literary lion Thomas McGuane (and filmed partly on his Montana ranch), directed by Frank Perry, and starring a young Jeff Bridges and Sam Waterston (as an Indian!), Elizabeth Ashley (pre-scary), Slim Pickens in his



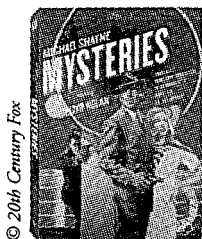
last great role as a range detective, Patti D'Arbanville (scrumpious) and Harry Dean Stanton before he was Harry Dean Stanton. It does involve crime: the indiscriminate shooting of cattle, the kidnapping of a champion seed bull (seminal, remember), and large-scale cattle rustling. Twisted cowpoke noir that's never been equaled.

Bill Crider, author of the Sheriff Dan Rhodes mystery series

A film noir in glorious Technicolor? Why not, if it stars Arlene Dahl and Rhonda Fleming, two of Hollywood's most gorgeous redheads. In *Slightly Scarlet* (based on *Love's Lovely Counterfeit* by James M. Cain), Arlene is the bad sister, a man-crazy klepto, just out of prison. Rhonda is the good sister, John Payne is a good/bad guy who's suddenly in charge of the mob, and Kent Taylor is the reform mayor. Ted de Corsica is the crime boss who leaves town but who you can bet will be back for the big shoot-out at the end. There's even a commentary track by Max Allan Collins. How can you go wrong?

Stuart M. Kaminsky, MWA Grand Master and author of the Toby Peters mystery series

I'm a sucker for the 1940s private eye definitely B movies. My all-time favorite is Lloyd Nolan as Michael Shayne. My Toby Peters owes a lot to him. The Shayne plots are full of holes, but Nolan is, for me, the quintessential wisecracking private eye. He's not quite dumb, is easily fooled, but is funny and tenacious. Would that Nolan had done more. By the way, *Sleepers West* is my favorite in the recently released DVD box set of Shayne movies.



Cara Black, author of the Aimée Leduc mystery series

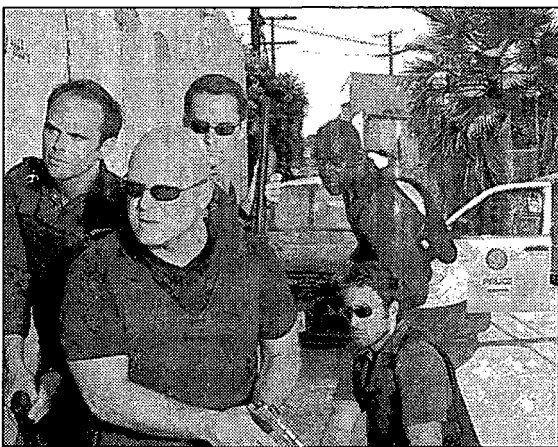
A film mainstream mystery fans might have overlooked, and my personal favorite, is the sly French thriller *Read My Lips* (*Sur mes lèvres*, 2001). The lead actress (Emmanuelle Devos) won a César, the French Oscar, for her performance, and the screenwriting team included Tonino Benacquista, a well-known French mystery writer. In short, Carla, a mousey secretary (Devos), is overqualified despite a disability that forces her to wear hearing aids. Still, her coworkers ridicule her for her plain looks, all the while taking credit for her work. She's on the verge of cracking until she's permitted to hire an assistant. Enter Paul, a street-smart ex-con, unqualified for the simplest of tasks in the office. But when it comes to steal a file a coworker pilfered from Carla's desk, Paul

has all the skills that Carla requires. Soon Paul discovers Carla's uncanny ability to read lips, and their relationship becomes a seductive tango as Paul enlists Carla in a revenge plot against a crooked loan shark. Suspense builds, the plot twists, and all is not as it seems in true Hitchcock style.

Kat Richardson, author of the Greywalker supernatural thriller series
Gotham (a.k.a. *The Dead Can't Lie*) is a guilty pleasure of mine. Made for cable in 1988 with low production values and a silly script, this mix of hardboiled detective and urban ghost story is still ridiculously entertaining. Who can't love watching Tommy Lee Jones, as a down-at-heels New York P.I., pursue and fall victim to the ultimate femme fatale: his obnoxious yuppie client's ghostly ex-wife? Even big hair and shoulder pads can't mar Virginia Madsen's luminous beauty as the manipulative ghost, and Jones is wonderfully hang-dog as the possibly doomed detective.

Ken Bruen, author of the Jack Taylor mystery/noir series
Ask any mystery writer about their favorite TV cop show, and ninety percent will say *The Wire*. For me, *The Shield* is closer to true

noir. The story lines from the off were dark, very, and as the seasons progressed, darker they got. There are no heroes in this show. The star, Michael Chiklis, leads his own team of vigilante cops: They're on the take, and in one memorable episode even killed



The Shield TM FX

one of their own who was being turned by the FBI. The series moved into top gear with the introduction of an Internal Affairs investigator (Forest Whitaker) who's determined to bring down the rogue cops—and who's as ruthless as any of the bad guys. And such is the sheer power of the series that you're rooting for the bad cops. They're greedy, vain, violent, and yet they have a sort of moral code—bent all out of shape, yes, but understandable from their point of view. This is essential viewing in all its dark glory.



MYSTERY CLASSIC

SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE

ANNOTATED BY LESLIE S. KLINGER

The release of The New Annotated Sherlock Holmes was one of the publishing events of 2004. Leslie S. Klinger's masterfully annotated, two-volume edition of the fifty-six short stories of the Sherlockian canon won the Edgar Award for best critical work of the year and was followed in 2005 by Mr. Klinger's annotated edition of the novels. This month, we are delighted to offer a classic Sherlock Holmes story with Mr. Klinger's enlightening notes (including a few, set in italics, which are updated from their original publication in book form).

THE ADVENTURE OF THE RED CIRCLE¹

Long before Mario Puzo, Francis Ford Coppola, and *The Sopranos* romanticized the Mafia for the American public, "The Red Circle" involved Sherlock Holmes with an Italian secret society so powerful that Dr. Watson was compelled to disguise its name. The "Italian colony" in London, although a distinct feature of the landscape, by and large kept itself apart from the rest of the population, and only one other case of Holmes's, "The Six Napoleons," involves Italians. Here, the Great Detective accidentally joins forces with the Pinkertons, America's premier private detective agency of the nineteenth century, to capture a cross-Atlantic killer. The Pinkertons appear again in the Sherlockian Canon in *The Valley of Fear* (1915), but this is the only record of Holmes working with them.

“Well, Mrs. Warren, I cannot see that you have any particular cause for uneasiness, nor do I understand why I, whose time is of some value, should interfere in the matter. I really have other things to engage me.” So spoke Sherlock Holmes, and turned back to the great scrapbook in which he was arranging and indexing some of his recent material.

But the landlady had the pertinacity, and also the cunning, of her sex. She held her ground firmly.

“You arranged an affair for a lodger of mine last year,” she said—
“Mr. Fairdale Hobbs.”

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"Ah, yes—a simple matter."

"But he would never cease talking of it—your kindness, sir, and the way in which you brought light into the darkness. I remembered his words when I was in doubt and darkness myself. I know you could if you only would."

Holmes was accessible upon the side of flattery, and also, to do him justice, upon the side of kindness. The two forces made him lay down his gum-brush with a sigh of resignation and push back his chair.

"Well, well, Mrs. Warren, let us hear about it, then. You don't object to tobacco, I take it? Thank you, Watson—the matches! You are uneasy, as I understand, because your new lodger remains in his rooms and you cannot see him. Why, bless you, Mrs. Warren, if I were your lodger you often would not see me for weeks on end."

"No doubt, sir; but this is different. It frightens me, Mr. Holmes. I can't sleep for fright. To hear his quick step moving here and moving there from early morning to late at night, and yet never to catch so much as a glimpse of him—it's more than I can stand. My husband is as nervous over it as I am, but he is out at his work all day, while I get no rest from it. What is he hiding for? What has he done? Except for the girl,² I am all alone in the house with him, and it's more than my nerves can stand."

Holmes leaned forward and laid his long, thin fingers upon the woman's shoulder. He had an almost hypnotic power of soothing when he wished. The scared look faded from her eyes, and her agitated features smoothed into their usual commonplace. She sat down in the chair which he had indicated. "If I take it up I must understand every detail," said he. "Take time to consider. The smallest point may be the most essential. You say that the man came ten days ago, and paid you for a fortnight's board and lodging?"

¹ The original title in the manuscript is "The Adventure of the Bloomsbury Lodger." The manuscript is owned by the Lilly Library at Indiana University and is described by Spencer C. Kennedy in "The Adventure of the Red Circle: An Examination of the Original Manuscript." "The Red Circle" was published in the *Strand Magazine* in March and April 1911.

In 2006, *The Baker Street Irregulars* published *Mandate for Murder: A Facsimile of the Original Manuscript of "The Adventure of the Red Circle,"* by Arthur Conan Doyle and Commentary, edited by Roy Pilot, Gianluca Salvatori, and Enrico Sollito (referred to below as "Mandate for Murder"). The volume contains a highly accurate transcript of the manuscript.

² Mrs. Warren's maid-servant, that is.

"He asked my terms, sir. I said fifty shillings a week.³ There is a small sitting-room and bedroom, and all complete, at the top of the house."⁴

"Well?"

"He said, 'I'll pay you five pounds a week if I can have it on my own terms.' I'm a poor woman, sir, and Mr. Warren earns little, and the money meant much to me. He took out a ten-pound note, and he held it out to me then and there. 'You can have the same every fortnight for a long time to come if you keep the terms,' he said. 'If not, I'll have no more to do with you.'"

"What were the terms?"

"Well, sir, they were that he was to have a key of the house. That was all right. Lodgers often have them. Also that he was to be left entirely to himself and never, upon any excuse, to be disturbed."

"Nothing wonderful in that, surely?"

"Not in reason, sir. But this is out of all reason. He has been there for ten days, and neither Mr. Warren, nor I, nor the girl has once set eyes upon him. We can hear that quick step of his pacing up and down, up and down, night, morning, and noon; but except on that first night he has never once gone out of the house."

"Oh, he went out the first night, did he?"

"Yes, sir, and returned very late—after we were all in bed. He told me after he had taken the rooms that he would do so, and asked me not to bar the door. I heard him come up the stair after midnight."

"But his meals?"

"It was his particular direction that we should always, when he rang, leave his meal upon a chair, outside his door. Then he rings again when he has finished and we take it down from the same chair. If he wants anything else he prints it on a slip of paper and leaves it."

"Prints it?"

"Yes, sir; prints it in pencil. Just the word, nothing more. Here's one I brought to show you—SOAP. Here's another—MATCH. This is one he left the first morning—DAILY GAZETTE.⁵ I leave that paper with his breakfast every morning."

"Dear me, Watson," said Holmes, staring with great curiosity at the slips of foolscap which the landlady had handed to him, "this is certainly a little unusual. Seclusion I can understand; but why print? Printing is a clumsy process. Why not write? What would it suggest, Watson?"

"That he desired to conceal his handwriting."

"But why? What can it matter to him that his landlady should have a word of his writing? Still, it may be as you say. Then,

3 *Baedeker's London and Its Environs* (1896) lists several boarding houses in Mrs. Warren's vicinity, near the British Museum (those belonging to Misses Wright, for example, on Upper Woburn Place, or to Mrs. Snell, on Bedford Place) that had rates of 7-8s. per day, although less expensive locations might run as little as 30s. to 40s. per week. Of course, Holmes and Watson are themselves lodgers, although Mrs. Hudson may appear to be the ideal landlady and no other tenants are ever mentioned. The "B" in 221B implies that there was a 221A which also formed a part of the premises at Baker Street, and there may well have been shared facilities (such as the water closets). In *A Study in Scarlet*, Watson reveals that upon his return to London from India, when he is receiving a wound pension of 11s. per day, he has been living in a hotel. The expense has been too much for him, however, and he eagerly agrees to share a "suite" with Holmes, who has been looking for someone to go in with him on the Baker Street apartment. Private apartments, such as those in which Holmes and Watson lodge at Baker Street, tended to run 15 to 21s. per week in the less-expensive neighbourhoods, but included only breakfast. We may deduce, therefore, that Watson's share of the cost of lodgings must have been closer to the 7-8s. per day that a boarding house would have cost, although eventually Holmes paid Mrs. Hudson a "princely sum" for the suite ("The Dying Detective").

4 People who tended to "take lodgings" were generally bachelors, spinsters, widows, out-of-towners, or working people

who had missed their trains out of London. All sought economical accommodations and were willing to sacrifice some degree of privacy. Unless one was willing to pay top dollar, the quality of the rooms and service was certainly not up to the level of a hotel, and landladies could be both solicitous and baldly opportunistic, charging extra for any variety of amenities. "Lodging houses," declared *Punch* magazine cheekily in its January-June 1842 issue, "[a]re distinguished by square inscriptions wafered to squares of glass, which usually intimate a desire on the part of the exhibitors (generally blooming widows) to share their domiciles with a 'single gentleman'." When introduced to the lady, she declares that everything is 'clean and comfortable' especially the window-curtains, whose colour cannot be seen for the dust; and the bed-room which was fumigated by the last lodger with tobacco smoke."

Still, Mrs. Warren's sole lodger may count himself fortunate (or sufficiently well funded) to have avoided the typical London boarding house, where the residents were more numerous and the scene slightly more disorderly. *London Characters and the Humorous Side of London Life* (1870), by Henry Mayhew et al., described such an environment as "neither public nor private," a living situation in which "individual freedom is lost, and, instead of living an independent life as at an hotel, the members of a 'circle' find themselves surrounded by such amenities as may be supposed to belong a rather large and singularly disunited family."

5 A fictitious newspaper.

again, why such laconic messages?"

"I cannot imagine."

"It opens a pleasing field for intelligent speculation. The words are written with a broad-pointed, violet-tinted pencil of a not unusual pattern. You will observe that the paper is torn away at the side here after the printing was done, so that the 'S' of 'SOAP' is partly gone. Suggestive, Watson, is it not?"

"Of caution?"

"Exactly. There was evidently some mark, some thumbprint, something which might give a clue to the person's identity. Now, Mrs. Warren, you say that the man was of middle size, dark, and bearded. What age would he be?"

"Youngish, sir—not over thirty."

"Well, can you give me no further indications?"

"He spoke good English, sir, and yet I thought he was a foreigner by his accent."

"And he was well dressed?"

"Very smartly dressed, sir—quite the gentleman. Dark clothes—nothing you would note."

"He gave no name?"

"No, sir."

"And has had no letters or callers?"

"None."

"But surely you or the girl enter his room of a morning?"

"No, sir; he looks after himself entirely."

"Dear me! That is certainly remarkable. What about his luggage?"

"He had one big brown bag with him—nothing else."

"Well, we don't seem to have much material to help us. Do you say nothing has come out of that room—absolutely nothing?"

The landlady drew an envelope from her bag; from it she shook out two burnt matches and a cigarette-end upon the table.

"They were on his tray this morning. I brought them because I had heard that you can read great things out of small ones."

Holmes shrugged his shoulders.

"There is nothing here," said he. "The matches have, of course, been used to light cigarettes. That is obvious from the shortness of the burnt end. Half the match is consumed in lighting a pipe or cigar. But, dear me! This cigarette stub is certainly remarkable. The gentleman was bearded and moustached, you say?"

"Yes, sir."

"I don't understand that. I should say that only a clean-shaven man could have smoked this. Why, Watson, even your modest moustache would have been singed."

"A holder?" I suggested.

"No, no; the end is matted. I suppose there could not be two people in your rooms, Mrs. Warren?"

"No, sir. He eats so little that I often wonder it can keep life in one."

"Well, I think we must wait for a little more material. After all, you have nothing to complain of. You have received your rent, and he is not a troublesome lodger, though he is certainly an unusual one. He pays you well, and if he chooses to lie concealed it is no direct business of yours. We have no excuse for an intrusion upon his privacy until we have some reason to think that there is a guilty reason for it. I've taken up the matter, and I won't lose sight of it. Report to me if anything fresh occurs, and rely upon my assistance if it should be needed.

"There are certainly some points of interest in this case, Watson," he remarked, when the landlady had left us. "It may, of course, be trivial—individual eccentricity; or it may be very much deeper than appears on the surface. The first thing that strikes one is the obvious possibility that the person now in the rooms may be entirely different from the one who engaged them."

"Why should you think so?"

"Well, apart from this cigarette-end, was it not suggestive that the only time the lodger went out was immediately after his taking the rooms? He came back—or someone came back—when all witnesses were out of the way. We have no proof that the person who came back was the person who went out. Then, again, the man who took the rooms spoke English well. This other, however, prints 'match' when it should have been 'matches.' I can imagine that the word was taken out of a dictionary, which would give the noun but not the plural. The laconic style may be to conceal the absence of knowledge of English. Yes, Watson, there are good reasons to suspect that there has been a substitution of lodgers."

"But for what possible end?"

"Ah! there lies our problem. There is one rather obvious line of investigation." He took down the great book in which, day by day, he filed the agony columns of the various London journals. "Dear me!" said he, turning over the pages, "what a chorus of groans, cries, and bleatings! What a rag-bag of singular happenings! But surely the most valuable hunting-ground that ever was given to a student of the unusual! This person is alone and cannot be approached by letter without a breach of that absolute secrecy which is desired. How is any news or any message to reach him from without? Obviously by advertisement through a

6 "But surely a letter (which could have been addressed simply to Mrs. Warren's lodger, without a name) would have been more secret than a newspaper entry that could be read by anyone!" remarks D. Martin Dakin. He proposes that the lodger garnered a sort of thrill out of acting clandestinely and courting risk—a tendency that Holmes, for that matter, often displayed himself.

7 This reference to the *Daily Gazette* was to the *Daily Telegraph* in the original manuscript, the agony columns of which Holmes referred to in "The Six Napoleons." Watson apparently determined, for reasons unknown, to change the name of the actual newspaper; he slipped up and used the real name in the manuscript, only to correct his slip-up later.

newspaper.⁶ There seems no other way, and fortunately we need concern ourselves with the one paper only. Here are the *Daily Gazette* extracts of the last fortnight.⁷ 'Lady with a black boa at Prince's Skating Club'—that we may pass. 'Surely Jimmy will not break his mother's heart'—that appears to be irrelevant. 'If the lady who fainted in the Brixton bus'—she does not interest me. 'Every day my heart longs—' Bleat, Watson—unmitigated bleat! Ah, this is a little more possible. Listen to this: 'Be patient. Will find some sure means of communication. Meanwhile, this column.—G.' That is two days after Mrs. Warren's lodger arrived. It sounds plausible, does it not? The mysterious one could understand English, even if he could not print it. Let us see if we can pick up the trace again. Yes, here we are—three days later. 'Am making successful arrangements. Patience and prudence. The clouds will pass.—G.' Nothing for a week after that. Then comes something much more definite: 'The path is clearing. If I find chance signal message remember code agreed—one A, two B, and so on. You will hear soon.—G.' That was in yesterday's paper, and there is nothing in to-day's. It's all very appropriate to Mrs. Warren's lodger. If we wait a little, Watson, I don't doubt that the affair will grow more intelligible."

So it proved; for in the morning I found my friend standing on the hearthrug with his back to the fire, and a smile of complete satisfaction upon his face.

"How's this, Watson?" he cried, picking up the paper from the table. "'High red house with white stone facings. Third floor. Second window left. After dusk.—G.' That is definite enough. I think after breakfast we must make a little reconnaissance of Mrs. Warren's neighbourhood. Ah, Mrs. Warren! what news do you bring us this morning?"

Our client had suddenly burst into the

room with an explosive energy which told of some new and momentous development.

"It's a police matter, Mr. Holmes!" she cried. "I'll have no more of it! He shall pack out of that⁸ with his baggage. I would have gone straight up and told him so, only I thought it was but fair to you to take your opinion first. But I'm at the end of my patience, and when it comes to knocking my old man about—"

"Knocking Mr. Warren about?"

"Using him roughly, anyway."

"But who used him roughly?"

"Ah! that's what we want to know! It was this morning, sir. Mr. Warren is a timekeeper at Morton and Waylight's, in Tottenham Court Road. He has to be out of the house before seven. Well, this morning he had not got ten paces down the road when two men came up behind him, threw a coat over his head, and bundled him into a cab that was beside the kerb. They drove him an hour, and then opened the door and shot him out. He lay in the roadway so shaken in his wits that he never saw what became of the cab. When he picked himself up he found he was on Hampstead Heath; so he took a bus home, and there he lies now on the sofa, while I came straight round to tell you what had happened."

"Most interesting," said Holmes. "Did he observe the appearance of these men—did he hear them talk?"

"No; he is clean dazed. He just knows that he was lifted up as if by magic and dropped as if by magic. Two at least were in it, and maybe three."

"And you connect this attack with your lodger?"

"Well, we've lived there fifteen years and no such happenings ever came before. I've had enough of him. Money's not everything. I'll have him out of my house before the day is done."

8 The word "that" appears in the *Strand Magazine* and American texts; it has been amended to "there" in the English first edition of *His Last Bow*.

9 For some reason, the word "lawyer" appears here in the manuscript in place of "lodger." Watson may have had legal problems on his mind at the time of writing up his notes, presumably in late 1910 or early 1911. By that time, Watson's writings had been widely published and pirated (in America especially), and Watson must have had frequent need to consult his solicitors.

"Wait a bit, Mrs. Warren. Do nothing rash. I begin to think that this affair may be very much more important than appeared at first sight. It is clear now that some danger is threatening your lodger. It is equally clear that his enemies, lying in wait for him near your door, mistook your husband for him in the foggy morning light. On discovering their mistake they released him. What they would have done had it not been a mistake, we can only conjecture."

"Well, what am I to do, Mr. Holmes?"

"I have a great fancy to see this lodger⁹ of yours, Mrs. Warren."

"I don't see how that is to be managed, unless you break in the door. I always hear him unlock it as I go down the stair after I leave the tray."

"He has to take the tray in. Surely we could conceal ourselves and see him do it."

The landlady thought for a moment.

"Well, sir, there's the box-room opposite. I could arrange a looking-glass, maybe, and if you were behind the door—"

"Excellent!" said Holmes. "When does he lunch?"

"About one, sir."

"Then Dr. Watson and I will come round in time. For the present, Mrs. Warren, good-bye."

At half-past twelve we found ourselves upon the steps of Mrs. Warren's house—a high, thin, yellow-brick edifice in Great Orme Street, a narrow thoroughfare at the northeast side of the British Museum. Standing as it does near the corner of the street, it commands a view down Howe Street, with its more pretentious houses. Holmes pointed with a chuckle to one of these, a row of residential flats, which projected so that they could not fail to catch the eye.

"See, Watson!" said he. "High red house with stone facings. There is the signal station

all right. We know the place, and we know the code; so surely our task should be simple. There's a 'To Let' card in that window. It is evidently an empty flat to which the confederate has access.¹⁰ Well, Mrs. Warren, what now?"

"I have it all ready for you. If you will both come up and leave your boots below on the landing, I'll put you there now."

It was an excellent hiding-place which she had arranged. The mirror was so placed that, seated in the dark, we could very plainly see the door opposite. We had hardly settled down in it, and Mrs. Warren left us, when a distant tinkle announced that our mysterious neighbour had rung. Presently the landlady appeared with the tray, laid it down upon a chair beside the closed door, and then, treading heavily, departed. Crouching together in the angle of the door, we kept our eyes fixed upon the mirror. Suddenly, as the landlady's footsteps died away, there was the creak of a turning key, the handle revolved, and two thin hands darted out and lifted the tray from the chair. An instant later it was hurriedly replaced, and I caught a glimpse of a dark, beautiful, horrified face glaring at the narrow opening of the box-room. Then the door crashed to, the key turned once more, and all was silence. Holmes twitched my sleeve, and together we stole down the stair.

"I will call again in the evening," said he to the expectant landlady. "I think, Watson, we can discuss this business better in our own quarters."

"My surmise, as you saw, proved to be correct," said he, speaking from the depths of his easy-chair. "There has been a substitution of lodgers. What I did not foresee is that we should find a woman, and no ordinary woman,"¹¹ Watson."

"She saw us."

"Well, she saw something to alarm her."

10 This sentence and the previous sentence have been added to the manuscript.

11 The phrase is "a beautiful woman" in the manuscript.

That is certain. The general sequence of events is pretty clear, is it not? A couple seek refuge in London from a very terrible and instant danger. The measure of that danger is the rigour of their precautions. The man, who has some work which he must do, desires to leave the woman in absolute safety while he does it. It is not an easy problem, but he solved it in an original fashion, and so effectively that her presence was not even known to the landlady who supplies her with food. The printed messages, as is now evident, were to prevent her sex being discovered by her writing. The man cannot come near the woman, or he will guide their enemies to her.¹² Since he cannot communicate with her direct, he has recourse to the agony column of a paper. So far all is clear."

"But what is at the root of it?"

"Ah, yes, Watson—severely practical, as usual! What is at the root of it all? Mrs. Warren's whimsical problem enlarges somewhat and assumes a more sinister aspect as we proceed. This much we can say: that it is no ordinary love escapade. You saw the woman's face at the sign of danger. We have heard, too, of the attack upon the landlord, which was undoubtedly meant for the lodger. These alarms, and the desperate need for secrecy, argue that the matter is one of life or death. The attack upon Mr. Warren further shows that the enemy, whoever they are, are themselves not aware of the substitution of the female lodger for the male. It is very curious and complex, Watson."

"Why should you go further in it? What have you to gain from it?"

"What, indeed? It is Art for Art's sake, Watson. I suppose when you doctored you found yourself studying cases without thought of a fee?"

"For my education, Holmes."

"Education never ends, Watson. It is a series of lessons with the greatest for the last. This is an instructive case. There is neither money nor credit in it, and yet one would wish to tidy it up. When dusk comes we should find ourselves one stage advanced in our investigation."

When we returned to Mrs. Warren's rooms, the gloom of a London winter evening had thickened into one grey curtain, a dead monotone of colour, broken only by the sharp yellow squares of the windows and the blurred haloes of the gaslamps. As we peered from the darkened sitting-room of the lodging-house, one more dim light glimmered high up through the obscurity.

"Someone is moving in that room," said Holmes in a whisper, his gaunt and eager face thrust forward to the window-pane. "Yes, I can see his shadow. There he is again! He has a candle in his hand. Now he is peering across. He wants to be sure that she is

on the look-out. Now he begins to flash. Take the message also, Watson, that we may check each other. A single flash—that is ‘A,’ surely. Now, then. How many did you make it? Twenty.¹³ So did I. That should mean ‘T.’ A T—that’s intelligible enough! Another ‘T.’ Surely this is the beginning of a second word. Now, then—TENTA. Dead stop. That can’t be all, Watson? ATTENTA gives no sense. Nor is it any better as three words AT, TEN, TA, unless ‘T.A.’ are a person’s initials. There it goes again! What’s that? ATTE—why, it is the same message over again. Curious, Watson, very curious! Now he is off once more! AT—why, he is repeating it for the third time. ‘ATTENTA’ three times! How often will he repeat it? No, that seems to be the finish. He has withdrawn from the window. What do you make of it, Watson?”

“A cipher message, Holmes.”

My companion gave a sudden chuckle of comprehension. “And not a very obscure cipher, Watson,” said he. “Why, of course, it is Italian! The ‘A’ means that it is addressed to a woman. ‘Beware! Beware! Beware!’ How’s that, Watson?”¹⁴

“I believe you have hit it.”

“Not a doubt of it. It is a very urgent message, thrice repeated to make it more so. But beware of what? Wait a bit; he is coming to the window once more.”

Again we saw the dim silhouette of a crouching man and the whisk of the small flame across the window as the signals were renewed. They came more rapidly than before—so rapid that it was hard to follow them.

“‘PERICOLO’—‘pericolo’—eh, what’s that, Watson? ‘Danger,’ isn’t it? Yes, by Jove, it’s a danger signal. There he goes again! ‘PERI.’ Halloa, what on earth—”

The light had suddenly gone out, the glimmering square of window had disappeared;

12 He has apparently already done so, unless the attack on Mr. Warren was mere hooliganism.

13 The manuscript reads nineteen, which under no circumstances could be correct. Watson apparently checked the results against his notes later.

14 See “The Secret Message,” page 137, for a discussion of the cipher.

15 In the manuscript, this question was followed by the line, "Scribbling a note, he rang for Mrs. Warren and directed her to drive with it instantly to Scotland Yard."

Apparently Watson subsequently recollected the true events and corrected the manuscript. Spencer Kennedy notes that if in fact Mrs. Warren had delivered the note, Holmes and Watson would not have met the Pinkerton agent, and it is probable that Watson's realisation of this spurred his memory.

16 See also "The Empty House," in which Holmes misquotes in a slightly different manner Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, Act II, Scene 3.

17 The Pinkerton National Detective Agency was founded by Allan Pinkerton (1819–1884), a Scotsman who emigrated to Illinois in 1842. He settled in West Dundee, near Chicago, and opened up a cooper's shop there. An ardent abolitionist, Pinkerton allowed his shop to serve as one of the many stations on the Underground Railroad.

While chopping wood one day on an uninhabited island in Fox River, Pinkerton stumbled upon evidence that led to the arrest and capture of a gang of counterfeiters.

and the third floor formed a dark band round the lofty building, with its tiers of shining casements. That last warning cry had been suddenly cut short. How, and by whom? The same thought occurred on the instant to us both. Holmes sprang up from where he crouched by the window.

"This is serious, Watson," he cried. "There is some devilry going forward! Why should such a message stop in such a way?¹⁵ I should put Scotland Yard in touch with this business—and yet, it is too pressing for us to leave."

"Shall I go for the police?"

"We must define the situation a little more clearly. It may bear some more innocent interpretation. Come, Watson, let us go across ourselves and see what we can make of it."

PART II

As we walked rapidly down Howe Street I glanced back at the building which we had left. There, dimly outlined at the top window, I could see the shadow of a head, a woman's head; gazing tensely, rigidly, out into the night, waiting with breathless suspense for the renewal of that interrupted message. At the doorway of the Howe Street flats a man, muffled in a cravat and greatcoat, was leaning against the railing. He started as the hall-light fell upon our faces.

"Holmes!" he cried.

"Why, Gregson!" said my companion as he shook hands with the Scotland Yard detective. "Journeys end with lovers' meetings.¹⁶ What brings you here?"

"The same reasons that bring you, I expect," said Gregson. "How you got on to it I can't imagine."

"Different threads, but leading up to the same tangle. I've been taking the signals."

"Signals?"

"Yes, from that window. They broke off in

the middle. We came over to see the reason. But since it is safe in your hands I see no object in continuing this business."

"Wait a bit!" cried Gregson, eagerly. "I'll do you this justice, Mr. Holmes, that I was never in a case yet that I didn't feel stronger for having you on my side. There's only the one exit to these flats, so we have him safe."

"Who is he?"

"Well, well, we score over you for once, Mr. Holmes. You must give us best this time." He struck his stick sharply upon the ground, on which a cabman, his whip in his hand, sauntered over from a four-wheeler which stood on the far side of the street. "May I introduce you to Mr. Sherlock Holmes?" he said to the cabman. "This is Mr. Leverton, of Pinkerton's American Agency."¹⁷

"The hero of the Long Island Cave Mystery?"¹⁸ said Holmes. "Sir, I am pleased to meet you."

The American, a quiet, businesslike young man, with a clean-shaven, hatchet face, flushed up at the words of commendation. "I am on the trail of my life now, Mr. Holmes," said he. "If I can get Gorgiano—"

"What! Gorgiano of the Red Circle?"¹⁹

"Oh, he has a European fame, has he? Well, we've learned all about him in America. We know he is at the bottom of fifty murders, and yet we have nothing positive we can take him on. I tracked him over from New York, and I've been close to him for a week in London, waiting some excuse to get my hand on his collar. Mr. Gregson and I ran him to ground in that big tenement house, and there's only the one door, so he can't slip us. There's three folk come out since he went in, but I'll swear he wasn't one of them."

"Mr. Holmes talks of signals," said Gregson. "I expect, as usual, he knows a good deal that we don't."

In a few clear words Holmes explained the

His pivotal role in bringing down the gang resulted in his being named deputy sheriff of Kane County in 1846, then the first city detective of Chicago's police force. But Pinkerton quickly saw that he would never make his fortune as a cop. In 1850, he left the Chicago force to start his own private detective agency, the first of its kind in Chicago and one of only a handful in the country.

Pinkerton National Detective Agency specialised in train robberies and achieved many spectacular successes, including no less than the thwarting of an 1861 assassination attempt on President-elect Lincoln in Baltimore. During the Civil War, Pinkerton worked for the Union side, heading an organisation that gathered intelligence on Confederate activity. After the war, detectives from the Pinkerton Agency infiltrated and broke up the Molly Maguires, an Irish-American secret society that controlled Pennsylvania's coal-mining industry (events central to *The Valley of Fear*). The sign above the door of the agency featured the motto "We Never Sleep" accompanying an illustration of an eye, an indelible image that gave rise to the term "private eye." Among the

sixteen books attributed to Pinkerton (as part of "Allan Pinkerton's Detective Stories") are *The Molly Maguires and the Detectives* (1877), viewed by many historians now as a highly biased work on the labour dispute, and *Criminal Reminiscences and Detective Sketches* (1879).

It is unlikely that Pinkerton himself and Holmes ever met, although some scholars posit a trip to America by Holmes prior to the 1881 events of *A Study in Scarlet*. While Holmes may have been intrigued by the idea of establishing an "agency" (a term he himself uses in "The Sussex Vampire"), he would likely have been appalled at Pinkerton's lack of education in the "science of detection," which Holmes essentially invented.

Many chronologists place the events of "The Red Circle" in 1902, at which point Pinkerton's sons, Robert and William, would have been in charge, having taken over the agency upon Pinkerton's death in 1882. Clearly, the Pinkerton National Detective Agency was eminently qualified to investigate the events at hand. But who, exactly, is the Pinkerton client in this case?

18 "The mystery, on true Sherlockian principles, is that there are no caves on Long Island," writes Christopher Morley, the quintessential New Yorker, in "Was Sherlock Holmes an American?" W. E. Edwards suggests that the word was "cove," noting that Glen Cove is a landmark for the golfer and the starch-manufacturer. David

H. Galerstein, in "A Solution to the Long Island Cave Mystery," proposes a *man-made* cave on the north shore of Long Island.

Other scholars challenge the assumption that Long Island, NY, was meant: Long Island, Tennessee, and Long Island, Alabama, are suggested. D. Martin Dakin proposes that Cave (spelled with a capital) was the name of the criminal or victim involved. William Ulrich makes the interesting suggestion that the "Cave" referred to was a term used to describe a cell of the Bohemian Brethren, a secret society, located on Long Island.

In "Case Closed: The Long Island Cave Mystery," appearing in *Mandate for Murder*, however, Steven T. Doyle demonstrates that this must refer to the "Brentwood Cave Man" mystery detailed in a series of articles appearing in *The Brooklyn Eagle* commencing in July 5, 1891. The articles detail the capture of the notorious robber Thomas Richardson and the discovery of Richardson's use of a cave near Jamaica, Long Island, as his hideout.

19 In the manuscript, Holmes responds, "What, the Black Hand Captain?" Evidently Watson (perhaps fearing reprisal) determined at this point to conceal the identity of the organisation of which Gorgiano was a member and changed the title of the manuscript.

situation as it had appeared to us. The American struck his hands together with vexation.

"He's on to us!" he cried.

"Why do you think so?"

"Well, it figures out that way, does it not? Here he is, sending out messages to an accomplice—there are several of his gang in London. Then suddenly, just as by your own account he was telling them that there was danger, he broke short off. What could it mean except that from the window he had suddenly either caught sight of us in the street, or in some way come to understand how close the danger was, and that he must act right away if he was to avoid it? What do you suggest, Mr. Holmes?"

"That we go up at once and see for ourselves."

"But we have no warrant for his arrest."

"He is in unoccupied premises under suspicious circumstances," said Gregson. "That is good enough for the moment. When we have him by the heels we can see if New York can't help us to keep him. I'll take the responsibility of arresting him now."

Our official detectives may blunder in the matter of intelligence, but never in that of courage. Gregson climbed the stair to arrest this desperate murderer with the same absolutely quiet and businesslike bearing with which he would have ascended the official staircase of Scotland Yard. The Pinkerton man had tried to push past him, but Gregson had firmly elbowed him back. London dangers were the privilege of the London force.

The door of the left-hand flat upon the third landing was standing ajar. Gregson pushed it open. Within all was absolute silence and darkness. I struck a match, and lit the detective's lantern. As I did so, and as the flicker steadied into a flame, we all gave a gasp of surprise. On the deal boards of the carpetless floor there was outlined a fresh track of blood. The red steps pointed towards us and led away from an inner room, the door of which was closed. Gregson flung it open and held his light full blaze in front of him, whilst we all peered eagerly over his shoulders.

In the middle of the floor of the empty room was huddled the figure of an enormous man, his clean-shaven, swarthy face grotesquely horrible in its contortion, and his head encircled by a ghastly crimson halo of blood, lying in a broad wet circle upon the white woodwork. His knees were drawn up, his hands thrown out in agony, and from the centre of his broad, brown, upturned throat there projected the white haft of a knife driven blade-deep into his body. Giant as he was, the man must have gone down like a pole-axed ox before that terrific blow. Beside his right hand a

most formidable horn-handled, two-edged dagger lay upon the floor, and near it a black kid glove.

"By George! it's Black Gorgiano himself!" cried the American detective. "Someone has got ahead of us this time."

"Here is the candle in the window, Mr. Holmes," said Gregson. "Why, whatever are you doing?"

Holmes had stepped across, had lit the candle, and was passing it backwards and forwards across the window-panes. Then he peered into the darkness, blew the candle out, and threw it on the floor.

"I rather think that will be helpful," said he. He came over and stood in deep thought while the two professionals were examining the body. "You say that three people came out from the flat while you were waiting downstairs," said he, at last. "Did you observe them closely?"

"Yes, I did."

"Was there a fellow about thirty, black-bearded, dark, of middle size?"

"Yes; he was the last to pass me."

"That is your man, I fancy. I can give you his description, and we have a very excellent outline of his footmark. That should be enough for you."

"Not much, Mr. Holmes, among the millions of London."

"Perhaps not. That is why I thought it best to summon this lady to your aid."

We all turned round at the words. There, framed in the doorway, was a tall and beautiful woman—the mysterious lodger of Bloomsbury. Slowly she advanced, her face pale and drawn with a frightful apprehension, her eyes fixed and staring, her terrified gaze riveted upon the dark figure on the floor.

"You have killed him!" she muttered. "Oh, *Dio mio*, you have killed him!" Then I heard a sudden sharp intake of her breath, and she sprang into the air with a cry of joy. Round and round the room she danced, her hands clapping, her dark eyes gleaming with delighted wonder, and a thousand pretty Italian exclamations pouring from her lips. It was terrible and amazing to see such a woman so convulsed with joy at such a sight. Suddenly she stopped and gazed at us all with a questioning stare.

"But you! You are police, are you not? You have killed Giuseppe Gorgiano. Is it not so?"

"We are police, madam."

She looked round into the shadows of the room.

"But where, then, is Gennaro?" she asked. "He is my husband, Gennaro Lucca. I am Emilia Lucca, and we are both from New

York. Where is Gennaro? He called me this moment from this window, and I ran with all my speed."

"It was I who called," said Holmes.

"You! How could you call?"

"Your cipher was not difficult, madam. Your presence here was desirable. I knew that I had only to flash '*Vieni*' and you would surely come."

The beautiful Italian looked with awe at my companion.

"I do not understand how you know these things," she said. "Giuseppe Gorgiano—how did he—" She paused, and then suddenly her face lit up with pride and delight. "Now I see it! My Gennaro! My splendid, beautiful Gennaro, who has guarded me safe from all harm, he did it, with his own strong hand he killed the monster. Oh, Gennaro, how wonderful you are! What woman could ever be worthy of such a man?"

"Well, Mrs. Lucca," said the prosaic Gregson, laying his hand upon the lady's sleeve with as little sentiment as if she were a Notting Hill hooligan,²⁰ "I am not very clear yet who you are or what you are; but you've said enough to make it very clear that we shall want you at the Yard."

"One moment, Gregson," said Holmes. "I rather fancy that this lady may be as anxious to give us information as we can be to get it. You understand, madam, that your husband will be arrested and tried for the death of the man who lies before us? What you say may be used in evidence.²¹ But if you think that he has acted from motives which are not criminal, and which he would wish to have known, then you cannot serve him better than by telling us the whole story."

"Now that Gorgiano is dead we fear nothing," said the lady. "He was a devil and a monster, and there can be no judge in the world who would punish my husband for having killed him."

20 "There has never been anything in the world absolutely like Notting Hill," wrote G. K. Chesterton in *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* (1904). "There will never be anything quite like it to the crack of doom." Formerly open countryside that was built up with houses, villas, and shops, Notting Hill was an area "at once urban and suburban," in the words of historian Peter Ackroyd, cyclically cursed with periods of rejuvenation and decline. Ackroyd quotes an 1860s issue of *Building News* in describing the beleaguered neighbourhood as "a graveyard of buried hopes. . . naked carcasses, crumbling decorations, fractured walls, slimy cement. All who touch them lose heart and money by the venture." In a further display of its feast-or-famine history, the neighbourhood, the setting for the fluffy eponymous romantic comedy film *Notting Hill* (1999), now epitomises what one long-time resident, British filmmaker Stephen Frears, in a recent *Los Angeles Times* interview, calls "trendy-spendy" London, with shops selling \$300 eyeglasses and cafes serving spaghetti with caramelized squid.

21 The concept that a British citizen should not

be compelled to incriminate him- or herself had existed since the mid-seventeenth century, when it was written into British common law. At that time, both interrogation and the trial process were handled by the courts; with the introduction of the Metropolitan Police Force in 1829, the task of interrogation was transferred from the magistrates to the police. Yet official policy on the rules of police interrogation remained somewhat muddled until 1912, when passage of the Judges' Rules established the administrative guideline (but not concrete law) that, prior to questioning a suspect, a police officer had to inform him or her of the right to remain silent.

Even though informing a suspect of these rights may not have become standard procedure until 1912, the London police did attempt to adhere to an unofficial protocol in the years before. Eight years prior to the passage of the Judges' Rules, Lord Brampton, in an "Address to the Police on their Duties," reproduced in the *Police Code of 1904*, carefully delineated between the process of investigation and that of interrogation. He explained that when one was attempting to discover the perpetrator of a crime, asking ques-

tions of any person who might have had relevant information was acceptable. The rules changed, however, at the moment arrest was imminent. Lord Brampton wrote that when "a Constable had a warrant to arrest, or is about to arrest a person on his own authority, or has a person in custody for a crime, it is wrong to question such person touching the crime of which he is accused. . . . On arresting a man a Constable ought simply to read his warrant, or tell the accused the nature of the charge upon which he is arrested, leaving it to the person so arrested to say anything or nothing as he pleases. . . . [H]e ought not, by anything he says or does, to invite or encourage an accused person to make any statement, without first cautioning him that he is not bound to say anything tending to criminate himself, and that anything he says may be used against him."

Although Signora Lucca apparently was not herself a suspect (but see note 23), Holmes here was apparently thinking of the general rule of British law that a spouse might not be compelled to testify against his or her spouse.

"In that case," said Holmes, "my suggestion is that we lock this door, leave things as we found them, go with this lady to her room, and form our opinion after we have heard what it is that she has to say to us."

Half an hour later we were seated, all four, in the small sitting-room of Signora Lucca, listening to her remarkable narrative of those sinister events, the ending of which we had chanced to witness. She spoke in rapid and fluent but very unconventional English, which, for the sake of clearness, I will make grammatical.

"I was born in Posilippo, near Naples," said she, "and was the daughter of Augusto Barelli, who was the chief lawyer and once the deputy of that part. Gennaro was in my father's employment, and I came to love him, as any woman must. He had neither money nor position—nothing but his beauty and strength and energy—so my father forbade the match. We fled together, were married at Bari, and sold my jewels to gain the money which would take us to America. This was four years ago, and we have been in New York ever since.

"Fortune was very good to us at first. Gennaro was able to do a service to an Italian gentleman—he saved him from some ruffians in the place called the Bowery, and so made a powerful friend. His name was Tito Castalotte, and he was the senior partner of the great firm of Castalotte and Zamba, who are the chief fruit importers of New York. Signor Zamba is an invalid, and our new friend Castalotte has all power within the firm, which employs more than three hundred men. He took my husband into his employment, made him head of a department, and showed his goodwill towards him in every way. Signor Castalotte was a bachelor, and I believe that he felt as if Gennaro was his son, and both my husband and I loved him as if he were our father. We had taken and furnished a little house in Brooklyn, and our whole future seemed assured, when that black cloud appeared which was soon to overspread our sky.

"One night, when Gennaro returned from his work, he brought a fellow-country-man back with him. His name was Gorgiano, and he had come also from Posilippo. He was a huge man, as you can testify, for you have looked upon his corpse. Not only was his body that of a giant, but everything about him was grotesque, gigantic, and terrifying. His voice was like thunder in our little house. There was scarce room for the whirl of his great arms as he talked. His thoughts, his emotions, his passions, all were exaggerated and monstrous. He talked, or rather roared, with such energy that others could but sit and listen, cowed with the mighty stream of words. His eyes blazed at you and held you at his mercy. He was

22 The Carbonari (Italian for "Charcoal Burners") were members of a secret political society that was active in early nineteenth-century southern Italy and may have originated with the Freemasonry. These dissidents first began agitating for political freedom during the reign of Gioacchino Murat, Napoleon's brother-in-law and the king of Naples (1808–1815). In general, while the Carbonari tended to advocate Italian unification and some form of constitutional and representative government, a more precise agenda was never defined.

As with the Freemasonry and other secret societies, the Carbonari had their own ritual language, gestures, initiation ceremony, and hierarchy (in this case, made up of "apprentices" and "masters"). Their revolutionary fervour spread from Naples to like-minded areas such as Piedmont, the Papal States, Bologna, Parma, and Modena; and to other countries, including Spain and France. In 1831, the nationalist *Risorgimento* movement was formed and eventually subsumed most of the Carbonari.

Violent uprising and assassination attempts characterized the

a terrible and wonderful man. I thank God that he is dead!

"He came again and again. Yet I was aware that Gennaro was no more happy than I was in his presence. My poor husband would sit pale and listless, listening to the endless raving upon politics and upon social questions which made up our visitor's conversation. Gennaro said nothing, but I who knew him so well could read in his face some emotion which I had never seen there before. At first I thought that it was dislike. And then, gradually, I understood that it was more than dislike. It was fear—a deep, secret, shrinking fear. That night—the night that I read his terror—I put my arms round him and I implored him by his love for me and by all that he held dear to hold nothing from me, and to tell me why this huge man overshadowed him so.

"He told me, and my own heart grew cold as ice as I listened. My poor Gennaro, in his wild and fiery days, when all the world seemed against him and his mind was driven half mad by the injustices of life, had joined a Neapolitan society, the Red Circle, which was allied to the old Carbonari.²² The oaths and secrets of this brotherhood were frightful; but once within its rule no escape was possible. When we had fled to America Gennaro thought that he had cast it all off forever. What was his horror one evening to meet in the streets the very man who had initiated him in Naples, the giant Gorgiano, a man who had earned the name of 'Death' in the South of Italy, for he was red to the elbow in murder! He had come to New York to avoid the Italian police, and he had already planted a branch of this dreadful society in his new home. All this Gennaro told me, and showed me a summons which he had received that very day, a Red Circle drawn upon the head of it telling him that a lodge would be held upon a

certain date, and that his presence at it was required and ordered.

"That was bad enough, but worse was to come. I had noticed for some time that when Gorgiano came to us, as he constantly did, in the evening, he spoke much to me; and even when his words were to my husband those terrible, glaring, wild-beast eyes of his were always turned upon me. One night his secret came out. I had awakened what he called 'love' within him—the love of a brute—a savage. Gennaro had not yet returned when he came. He pushed his way in, seized me in his mighty arms, hugged me in his bear's embrace, covered me with kisses, and implored me to come away with him. I was struggling and screaming when Gennaro entered and attacked him. He struck Gennaro senseless and fled from the house which he was never more to enter. It was a deadly enemy that we made that night."

"A few days later came the meeting. Gennaro returned from it with a face which told me that something dreadful had occurred. It was worse than we could have imagined possible. The funds of the society were raised by blackmailing rich Italians and threatening them with violence should they refuse the money. It seems that Castalotte, our dear friend and benefactor, had been approached. He had refused to yield to threats, and he had handed the notices to the police. It was resolved now that such an example should be made of him as would prevent any other victim from rebelling. At the meeting it was arranged that he and his house should be blown up with dynamite. There was a drawing of lots as to who should carry out the deed. Gennaro saw our enemy's cruel face smiling at him as he dipped his hand in the bag. No doubt it had been pre-arranged in some fashion, for it was the fatal disc with the Red Circle upon it, the mandate for murder which lay upon his

Carbonari movement, but still, the political aims of the group seem at odds with the "dreadful" terrorist society Signora Lucca describes here. This incongruence may be explained by the fact that in the manuscript, Gennaro is linked to "the famous Camorra" rather than to the Carbonari. The Camorra remained in existence through the end of the nineteenth century and had an agenda that was more criminal than political, and therefore it is likely that Gennaro was in fact ensnared by the Camorra rather than the Carbonari. Watson, fearing repercussions for his portrayal of Gennaro's terrifying countryman, must have thought better of his initial candour and altered the reference to a Neapolitan society far less likely to seek retribution.

In "Secret Societies of Some Sort: Mafia, Camorra, and Carboneria," appearing in Mandate for Murder, Gianluca Salvatori explores the history of these organisations in more detail.

palm. He was to kill his best friend, or he was to expose himself and me to the vengeance of his comrades. It was part of their fiendish system to punish those whom they feared or hated by injuring not only their own person, but those whom they loved, and it was the knowledge of this which hung as a terror over my poor Gennaro's head and drove him nearly crazy with apprehension.

"All that night we sat together, our arms round each other, each strengthening each for the troubles that lay before us. The very next evening had been fixed for the attempt. By mid-day my husband and I were on our way to London, but not before he had given our benefactor full warning of his danger, and had also left such information for the police as would safeguard his life for the future.

"The rest, gentlemen, you know for yourselves. We were sure that our enemies would be behind us like our own shadows. Gorgiano had his private reasons for vengeance, but in any case we knew how ruthless, cunning, and untiring he could be. Both Italy and America are full of stories of his dreadful powers. If ever they were exerted it would be now. My darling made use of the few clear days which our start had given us in arranging for a refuge for me in such a fashion that no possible danger could reach me. For his own part, he wished to be free that he might communicate both with the American and with the Italian police. I do not myself know where he lived, or how. All that I learned was through the columns of a newspaper. But once, as I looked through my window, I saw two Italians watching the house, and I understood that in some way Gorgiano had found out our retreat. Finally Gennaro told me, through the paper, that he would signal to me from a certain window, but when the signals came they were nothing but warnings, which were suddenly interrupted. It is very clear to me now that he knew Gorgiano to be close upon him, and that, thank God! he was ready for him when he came. And now, gentlemen, I would ask you whether we have anything to fear from the Law, or whether any judge upon earth would condemn my Gennaro for what he has done?"

"Well, Mr. Gregson," said the American, looking across at the official, "I don't know what your British point of view may be, but I guess that in New York this lady's husband will receive a pretty general vote of thanks."²³

"She will have to come with me and see the Chief," Gregson answered. "If what she says is corroborated, I do not think she or her husband has much to fear."²⁴ But what I can't make head or tail of, Mr. Holmes, is how on earth *you* got yourself mixed up in the matter."

"Education, Gregson, education. Still seeking knowledge at the old university. Well, Watson, you have one more specimen of the

tragic and grotesque to add to your collection. By the way, it is not eight o'clock, and a Wagner night at Covent Garden! If we hurry, we might be in time for the second act." 🐾

THE SECRET MESSAGE

There are apparent problems with the secret message as decoded by Sherlock Holmes. Professor Louis E. Lord of the Classics Department at Oberlin College points out that the Italian alphabet contains no K (and, he might have added, no W, X, or Y, and only occasionally J). More complicated still, Holmes was initially unaware that the message was being transmitted in Italian, and thus would have seen no need to consider any but the twenty-six-letter English alphabet. Professor Lord argues, as reported by Vincent Starrett in his "Explanation" (Introduction) to *221B: Studies in Sherlock Holmes*, that in Italian, twenty flashes is not a "T" (as immediately interpreted by Holmes) but—by virtue of the missing "K"—actually a "U." He continues, "The full message as read by Holmes is 'Attenta, pericolo!' Yet the omission of K must have misplaced every letter below it, and Holmes should have read, not 'Attenta pericolo!' but 'Assemse, oeqicnkn!' Or, if Signor Lucca, sending his warning, had—for the convenience of Holmes and Watson—used the English alphabet, his wife, who knew little English and was expecting the message in Italian, would have read 'Auueoua, qesicpmp!' Well, it is a sufficiently startling message, either way; and it is no slight testimony to the ability of Sherlock Holmes that he brought off the case with honours."

Careful study of Lord's argument reveals a basic contradiction in his own work. S. F. Blake writes that "it is unfortunately necessary for me to point out [an error] which Prof. Lord himself committed. He says that Holmes should

23 Daniel Griffin concludes that Emilia lied about who was pursuing whom, that she had run off with Gorgiano and that Gennaro Lucca pursued them. John Hall, in *Sidelights on Holmes*, poses much the same theory, except that in his version, Lucca killed his wife, disguised himself as a woman, killed Gorgiano, and then emerged as "Signora" Lucca, to test the waters as to his own safety.

24 In "My Name is Barelli—Augusto Barelli," appearing in *Mandate for Murder*, Enrico Solito convincingly argues that one Giuseppe Maria Mirabelli was the real Augusto Barelli, father of "Emilia Lucca," and suggests that Emilia was actually Mirabelli's daughter Clotilde. Domenico Bonanno, an Italian-born New York fruit importer, was the actual "Tito Castalotte," and his brother Giuseppe Bonanno was likely concealed as "Zampa," the partner of "Castalotte." Solito also proposes that the Red Circle was originally a benevolent political group, but with Gorgiano at its head, the organisation abandoned its political ideals and became a criminal society.

have read the message 'Assemsa, oeqicnkn.' Since Holmes counted the first three series of flashes as 1, 20, 20, and then translated them A, T, T, we have to infer that he counted the other flashes in this word as 5, 14, 20, 1 in order to translate it as 'attenta.' But 1, 20, 20, 5, 14, 20, 1 flashes do not spell out 'assemsa' in any language known to me, certainly not in English or Italian, the only two in question here. They spell 'attenta' in the English alphabet and 'auueoua' in the Italian. In the English alphabet, 'assemsa' would call for 1, 19, 19, 5, 13, 19, 1 flashes, and in Italian, 1, 18, 18, 5, 12, 18, 1. A similar situation holds, obviously, with regard to the word 'pericolo' (or oeqicnkn). It is clearly *lèse majesté*, or something approaching it, to accuse the keen-eyed Holmes of being unable to count up to 20."

Donald A. Yates expresses the view that the code agreed upon must have been to spell Italian in the English alphabet ("A Final Illumination of the Lucca Code"). He argues that Gennaro selected English so as to make the code unreadable by Gorgiano. Further, Yates points to Signora Lucca's "smooth flow of perfect, well-phrased English sentences." However, Blake contends that Gorgiano undoubtedly learned English in New York and observes that the sentences of Signora Lucca to which Yates refers were expressly made grammatical by Dr. Watson. Blake argues instead that Gennaro selected the English language alphabet because he needed the letter K to transmit specific words (for example, "Black Joe"). Josh Pachter argues that Gennaro Lucca gave his wife the "key" to the cipher, consisting of using the Italian alphabet *but inserting the letter K*.

D. Martin Dakin comments, "I wonder if an unnecessary fuss has not been made over this. Although Italian does not use K (or W, X or Y), I doubt if Italians are taught an alphabet without them, and surely it is not unreasonable to suggest that a common alphabet of twenty-six traditional letters is generally accepted all over western Europe." This seems borne out by the *Encyclopædia Britannica* (9th Ed.), which lists the Russian and Cyrillic alphabets as the only European-alphabet variants of note.

Blake performed the interesting experiment of attempting to flash a lighted candle as rapidly as possible across a window to convey the recorded message. He concludes that about 477 candle waves are required, consuming almost five minutes, for the brief message recorded. This experiment was redone by Allen Mackler and Sheldon Wesson, who report in "Light Upon the Candle" that while Blake is in error and the message requires only 384 passes, 7 minutes 7 seconds seems to be a more likely time.

Dakin responds: "A greater mystery is why Gennaro should have chosen such a protracted and cumbersome way of sending Emilia

a (three times repeated, with Gorgiano at his heels at any moment!) rather pointless message about a danger of which she was already aware and couldn't do anything about anyway. He could have said it just as well in his newspaper advertisements."

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THE STORY THAT WON

The September Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Stephen D. Rogers of Buzzards Bay, Massachusetts. Honorable mentions go to B.J. Bourg of Mathews, Louisiana; Judith Fawley of Pensacola, Florida; James Hagerty of Melbourne, Florida; Kyle S. Jorgensen of Overland Park, Kansas; Adrian Ludens of Rapid City, South Dakota; Randall A. Martin of Topeka, Kansas; Ruth M. McCarty of Leominster, Massachusetts; and Tom Woodward of Marietta, Georgia.



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BEDTIME STORY

STEPHEN D. ROGERS

Nobody took crazy old men seriously.

Buzz was a retired something or other. "Forty years on the job and never missed a day."

Every morning except Sundays, he went down to the post office to retrieve his copy of a paper covering Roswell, New Mexico, and saluted Gayle behind the counter.

Buzz read the paper over breakfast at the Sunnyside Café: two eggs (one scrambled, one fried), hash browns, and coffee. Buzz either tipped exactly fifteen percent or eighty-seven cents over that. If he tipped fifteen, the dishwasher cleaned the grill. If he tipped eighty-seven cents extra, the cook mopped the floor.

After breakfast, Buzz returned home to fiddle with his communications equipment. The aliens transmitted on different wavelengths every day.

The only exception to this pattern was when he set off to investigate a sighting, driving out of town with a honk and wave to all who knew him.

But none of them really knew him.

Buzz was an assassin. He killed people whose removal was thought prudent by a government committee representing the major agencies.

He didn't ask why his targets—seemingly innocuous citizens—had been chosen.

The folks back home thought him nothing more than a fool. That's why he started telling the truth to those who would never have the opportunity to tell anyone else.

People like you.

THE LINEUP

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BRENDAN DUBOIS's eleventh novel, *Twilight*, was published in November by St. Martin's Minotaur/Thomas Dunne.

DAVID EDGERLEY GATES has published twenty-two stories with AHMM since 1980. His story "Aces and Eights" (December 2003) was nominated for an Edgar Award in 2004. Mr. Gates lives in New Mexico.

Booked & Printed columnist ROBERT C. HAHN reviews mysteries for *Publishers Weekly* and *New York Post*, among other places, and is the former mystery columnist for the *Cincinnati Post*.

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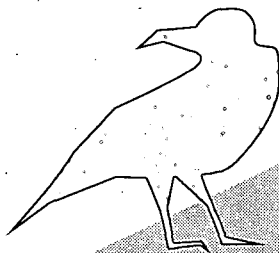
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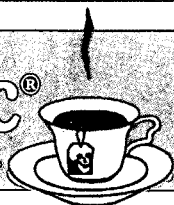
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